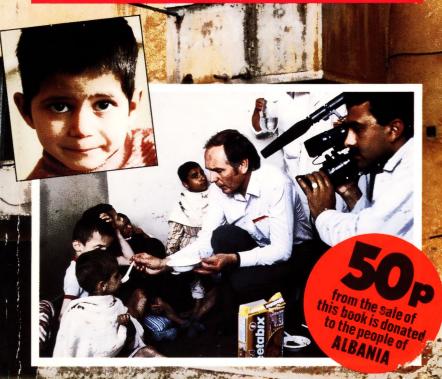
# ALBANIA

WHO CARES?



THE EXCLUSIVE INSIDE STORY

PHOTOGRAPHY: BHASKER SOLANKI

# ALBANIA WHO CARES?

BILL HAMILTON BHASKER SOLANKI



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#### The author BILL HAMILTON

is a correspondent with BBC Television News. His travels have taken him to wars and disasters, earthquakes and floods. Yet no story has made a deeper personal impression upon him than the plight of the Albanian people struggling, against insufferable odds, to throw off the

shackles of nearly 50 years of brutal Communist rule. His reports highlighting the dreadful suffering of the country's forgotten children, fighting for survival in hospitals without proper food or medicines, sparked off an international appeal for aid which brought an overwhelming response. Bill, along with BBC senior cameraman, Bhasker Solanki, was subsequently awarded Albania's highest civilian award, The Order of Mother Teresa. Bill, born in Dundee, Scotland, is a Class One Association Football referee and attends the Salvation Army Citadel in St. Albans. He lives with his wife, Veronica and two children, Claire and David, in Hertfordshire.



#### The photographer BHASKER SOLANKI

lives with his wife Ranjana and little daughter, Deepa in Leicester where he has been busily engaged in organizing his own fund-raising activities for Albania. A highly esteemed and widely travelled senior cameraman, he has filmed reports in many of the world's trouble spots

including Tiananmen Square, the Kurdish refugee crisis and war-torn Bosnia. Along with Bill Hamilton, he received a Royal Television Society commendation for his film dispatches from Albania.





#### THE REPUBLIC OF ALBANIA

From the office of the president TIRANA

Albania and Great Britain are less than two thousand miles apart, yet European cousins who barely spoke to each other for forty-six years.

Now the Communist dictatorship that isolated my country from the rest of the world has gone, replaced by the forces of democracy, the return of human rights, freedom of speech and fresh hope for the future.

However, the legacy of those years of terror is all too evident. Thousands of our people are suffering through hunger, ill health and poverty. We know we cannot address these problems without substantial aid and investment from the West. In this respect, the Republic of Albania would like to pay tribute to the people of Britain who have given five million pounds in humanitarian aid to help the poorest and weakest in my country.

Many I know were prompted to respond by Bill Hamilton's reports on the suffering of Albania's children which were featured on BBC Television News. I am delighted that he has decided to write of his experiences here. There is tragedy, courage and humour within these pages and we are grateful that at last notice has been taken by ordinary men, women and children of a small Balkan nation which is anxious to play its part in a new and peaceful Europe.

My grateful thanks to all who have taken to their hearts the cause of Albania.

SALI BERISHA





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#### INTRODUCTION

In the fifties Albania was the country nearly every school textbook ignored. It was almost as if the place did not exist. Today, awareness of the country is still greatly limited. Many have considerable difficulty placing it on a map of Europe — not altogether surprising considering Albania's policy of self-imposed isolation for close on half a century. This tiny Balkan state, little larger than Wales, was, from the end of the Second World War until his death in 1985, in the hands of a ruthless Stalinist dictator. Enver Hoxha (pronounced as hodger) ruled his country through terror, the politics of the permanent purge and a personality cult that verged on the paranoiac.

Those of his subjects who dared to remotely criticize his totalitarian regime were declared 'enemies of the people', removed from job and home and either liquidated or sent into labour camps with their families for a lifetime. Successive links with Yugoslavia, the Soviet Union and China were severed, all forms of religion outlawed and no opposition tolerated from whatever quarter it might come.

Hoxha even persuaded his people that they had the highest standard of living in Europe and that there were many enemies preparing to take it from them. Nearly a million military pillboxes, standing like concrete mushrooms, were erected across the Albanian countryside. They were to protect every house, every field and every factory from invasion from the West. To keep his people sealed within their own borders, Hoxha had cleverly played on the lessons of history. Yet whatever the Romans, the Ottomans and the Italian and Nazi Fascists may have done in the past, the simple truth was that the world was now completely indifferent to Hoxha's Albania. He had managed to pull off one of the twentieth-century's greatest confidence tricks, and the amount of concrete used for constructing the

country's defences was more than enough to have built a decent house for every Albanian family.

The ever-worsening economic crisis, leading to a flood of refugees fleeing to Italy and student protests at home. pushed Hoxha's successor, Ramiz Alia, into introducing some mild reforms. The overthrow of the Ceausescu regime in Romania served as a catalyst for Albanian youth to begin their own revolution, albeit relatively bloodless. It was only a matter of time before the last Communist 'domino' in Eastern Europe would fall. Before that was finally achieved through free, democratic elections in March 1992, Albania had already started to open its doors to the outside world. Taking a look inside along with BBC News cameraman, Bhasker Solanki, was a sad and highly distressing mission. In a country with the fastest growing population in Europe and where half the people are under 20 years old, we found babies dying for the want of something to eat, hospitals deprived of the most elementary medicines and equipment, and homeless and penniless families emerging from prison and labour camps where they had been locked away for as long as forty-seven years.

For the first time, some of them have been prepared to speak of their experiences. This book is intended as a tribute both to their personal faith and courage in the face of relentless persecution and torture, and to the many thousands of people in Britain who have responded with five million pounds worth of humanitarian aid as well as professional help to ease the suffering in Europe's poorest country.

If Albania is paying a heavy price for the failed isolationist policies of its former dictator then the dreadful prospect is that just as the country takes its first tentative steps along the democratic path, rising tensions in the Serbian province of Kosovo — where 90 per cent of the population are ethnic Albanians — could explode into outright rebellion which might suck Albania into a wider Balkans conflict, thus bringing an already embattled nation to the verge of collapse.

## LAND OF THE EAGLES

Shqiperi or Land of the Eagles is the official name for Albania and an apt description of a country where 70 per cent of the land is wild, rugged and mountainous. Pilots approaching from the Adriatic on their final descent adopt a similar landing style to the great bird itself, often circling Rinas Airport three times to ensure the runway is clear of errant children and cattle before making the final swoop on to the uneven runway. Such skills frequently elicit spontaneous applause from grateful passengers uncertain of what to expect as they enter the Albanian time warp.

My first visit to the place was in March 1989 when the control tower had unusually to handle two incoming planes at once. The England football team in their chartered aircraft touching down just two minutes ahead of the regular Swissair flight from Zurich.

The World Cup qualifying competition had drawn England in the same section as the Albanians whose players had a rare opportunity to see how people really lived in the capitalist societies their leaders so vehemently condemned. The return match at Wembley though, was still a few weeks away. First it was England's turn to experience life on the other side of a door that had been closed to most of the world for well over forty years.

Suspicions about Albanian hospitality (entirely ill-founded) meant their stay would be brief and risk-free. They even brought their own chef and bags of peeled potatoes. The time it took to unload them all was equal only to the

inevitable delay caused by the Albanians' insistence on checking inside every suitcase just in case someone may have inadvertently popped in an issue of *Playboy* or *The Times* or, just as offensive to the Marxist-Leninist leadership, a copy of the Bible.

My good fortune to have been allowed in was emphasized by a conversation with the Swissair pilot and stewardesses who could not recall how many times they had landed here yet had never been allowed out of the airport perimeter.

On the bus at last, the Fleet Street sports writers suddenly found themselves subjected to a non-stop commentary on the virtues of Albanian life as expounded by Ilia Zhulati, a press officer from the Foreign Affairs Department, who could describe in infinite detail his Government's policy towards any and every nation of the world from which we had all believed they had totally isolated themselves. Those who had brought ear plugs to cope with the change in air pressure on the incoming flight now had a decided advantage, being able to concentrate instead on the traffic jams caused by donkey and oxen carts carrying workers and goods home from another tiring day in the fields.

Forty minutes later we had reached the Hotel Tirana where a crowd several hundred strong had gathered to await the team's arrival. Mr. Zhulati, however, had still not finished espousing the virtues of the country's former dictator, Comrade Enver Hoxha. The bus doors remained shut until his speech was finished.

Anywhere else in the world, football fans as passionate as these Albanians would have made a rush for the steps of the bus, armed with cameras and autograph books. In Tirana they had neither. Instead, the crowd stood behind the police in orderly lines, staring at the England players as if sighting aliens from another planet.

England won the match 2-0 and left immediately for the airport. Those of us who remained behind began to gain an insight into this forgotten nation whose history is lost in the mists of time.

It is now generally accepted that the Albanians are

descendants of the Illyrian tribes who settled in the north of the country in the third century BC. After a hundred years of warfare between the Illyrians and the Romans along the Adriatic coast, Illyria was finally annexed and became a Roman province. Between the seventh and ninth centuries Albania was invaded and settled by various Slav tribes.

In the fifteenth century the Albanians fiercely resisted attempts by the Ottoman Turks to take over the country. The man who was destined to become their national hero George Kastrioti, or Skanderbeg, led a successful revolt for over twenty-five years. Albania though, did not free itself from Turkey until 1912.

In the following year representatives of the great powers met in London to establish Albania's borders and the country became a self-governing principality. In the settlement the province of Kosovo was given to Serbia. Today more than one and a half million ethnic Albanians (the equivalent of half the population of Albania itself) live there.

In the First World War Austria invaded the northern part of Albania while the southern half was in Italian hands. It was to be the 1920s before foreign forces finally left the country.

Ahmet Zogu, a clan chieftain and landowner, became President of the country in 1925 and three years later declared himself King Zog I of the Albanians. His was an authoritarian rule, though by Albanian standards a relatively peaceful period. In 1939 though, the King refused to allow Italy to use Albanian ports for military purposes and Mussolini's forces invaded the country forcing Zog to flee into exile.

The Second World War was now under way. Its end was to bring Enver Hoxha to power for longer than any other twentieth-century Communist leader apart from Kim Il-sung of North Korea.

The dictatorship spanned forty-one years. By 1989 — four years after his death — I discovered you had merelyto take a few steps from the front door of your hotel to realize that Hoxha was still ruling from the grave.

Attempts to make my own way on foot around the city were frustrated by a sullen-faced man who followed me everywhere. By Albanian standards he was very well dressed, wearing a smart grey suit and well-polished leather shoes. He stopped me on two occasions, trying to discover where I was going and insisted on accompanying me back to the hotel, where he made enquiries about my room number and the purpose of my visit from the receptionist. It was my first encounter with a member of the Sigurimi, the Albanian secret police.

I was to learn later from an Albanian friend who visited Britain just how ubiquitous and powerful this network of plain clothed agents and informers could be.

In September 1983 Ylli Hasani, a young medical student, went with some friends to visit the ancient castle of Kruja. Outside, they spotted a group of foreign tourists who were conversing in English.

'I had been studying the language for three or four years, and I very much wanted to practise my English. I knew that talking to foreigners was a serious offence under Albanian law, but I succumbed to temptation and spoke to one of them. I remember saying that the origin of the name Kruja is the word *krua* which means water-spring. The tourist, who happened to be from Belgium, seemed to be interested in what I was saying and I was in seventh heaven. All of a sudden I felt a powerful hand clench my arm like a vice. I started in fear. When I turned round I saw a stalwart-looking man scowling at me. The realization that I was standing face to face with an agent of the Sigurimi had me in a state of alarm.

""Who has authorized you to talk to foreign tourists, lad, eh?"

"'No one," I stuttered, "I just wanted . . . " — but he did not deign to hear my explanation.

"'Look here, son," he added in a domineering voice, "don't you dare do this again or we'll talk to you in another language." (implying the use of violence). "And now get the out of here!"

'I was petrified and could see reproachful looks on

the faces of my friends. All that day I was in a state of paranoia, for I was sure I had been put on the Sigurimi blacklist and being there was like having the sword of Damocles over my head. That fear would haunt me for a long time.'

It would be seven years before Ylli Hasani, now a qualified GP, felt confident enough to bite back. In May 1990, when the anti-Communist avalanche that had swept across Eastern Europe was fast heading towards Albania, the then United Nations Secretary-General, Javier Perez de Cuellar, visited Kruja as part of a week-long visit to the country. The night before, Hasani learned from the BBC World Service that his favourite correspondent, Misha Glenny, was among the media party covering the tour. After Perez de Cuellar left, the doctor broke through the crowd and approached Glenny.

'Being well aware of the situation in Albania, Glenny asked no political questions. He just wanted to know how I had come to listen to the World Service during the years of Communist repression and said he'd like to record the conversation.

'No sooner had I said farewell than a man approached and asked: "What was it that you were talking about to that Western journalist?"

'I saw my chance of revenge. "If you are burning with curiosity about what I said, then go and ask him because everything has been recorded."

'The man drew in his horns. "Oh, no, not at all. Don't misunderstand me. I was just surprised at how fluent your English is", he waffled.

'I know who you are,' Hasani said bitterly, 'but I'm afraid it is too late now. Your number is up.' His boldness was born out of the certain knowledge that Albanians were following the rest of Eastern Europe down an increasingly familiar road to the excitement and uncertainties of greater freedom.

In the free elections of 1991 the Communists lost the cities but held on to power because of the reluctance of the peasants in the rural areas (where two-thirds of the people

live) to vote for change. Within three months though, the Government had fallen after a three week general strike brought the country to its knees. An attempt at coalition government with the Democratic Party fared little better and in a fresh round of elections the following year the Democrats swept to power with well over 60 per cent of the popular vote.

By then the country was in economic chaos, its people queuing sometimes for hours just to get bread. To watch the excitement of children walking home with a loaf under each arm, you would have thought they were carrying bars of gold. At night many of them were being sent on to the streets by their parents to set rubbish alight to keep themselves warm. Firewood was fast running out. Along some country roads there was hardly a tree left standing, such was the desperation. The shops were empty — no meat, no fish, no coffee.

At one stage the railway network had to be closed down completely. The general manager feared a disaster. Railway sleepers had been removed to be used as a source of fuel, and signalling wire was torn down by those who had thought of an innovative way of connecting electrical supplies from street lights into their homes.

Nearly 70 per cent of the adult population were out of work. There were no raw materials for the factories. Machines stood idle and resilience was wearing thin. One electrical worker trying to mend a severed cable was machine-gunned to death by an angry mob.

Lethargy had set in with Albanians losing the desire to work and becoming almost totally dependent on Western aid.

Even counting the votes on polling night was symptomatic of the country's ills. The lights went out as a power failure plunged Tirana into darkness yet again. The ballot papers had to be sorted by candlelight.

The country's new President, a 48-year-old cardiologist, Sali Berisha, decided to set an example by refusing to move into the Presidential Palace or the less pretentious villa used by his predecessor. Instead, he insisted in stay-

ing put with his family in their two-bedroomed flat in a rundown Tirana housing estate.

Over a hundred thousand people had filled Skanderbeg Square to celebrate the Democrats' victory. After nearly half a century Albania had come in from the cold, the last State in Eastern Europe to split with Communism. In the euphoria, the cars that just a year ago Albanians would not have been allowed to own, drove triumphantly back and forth across the city centre until they ran out of fuel.

The ghosts of Albania's Stalinist past had finally been laid to rest. The huge bronze and stone statues of Enver Hoxha that used to tower over the central square of every town are now lying in a deserted warehouse, the broken pieces to be used in the reconstruction of Europe's most impoverished country. The 'Pyramid of the Pharaoh', the name Albanian students gave to the multi-million-pound museum built to hold everything Hoxha ever possessed, was closed within three years. It's due to be turned into one of Europe's largest discothèques.

The man who for so long had exercised absolute control over the minds of his people was now remembered with outright hatred and revulsion.

If he had been a cult figure during his lifetime, he was seen, five years after his death, as the arch-enemy. Those who followed blindly the course he set for their lives have now been reflecting angrily on the way they were deceived by his dogma. Over a cup of coffee in Tirana's Hotel Dajte, teacher Mira Naçi talked about the effects of Hoxha's doctrine on her formative years.

'His teachings became part and parcel of our daily lives. We had to carry them out without argument. That's why Albanians became like robots. We all thought the same way, behaved in the same way, dressed in the same way and lived our lives the same way because we had only his teachings to guide us. They were our Holy Bible — sacred in every way — and it seemed life made no sense without them.

'When Hoxha died, people cried in their thousands.









If you dared to come out on to the streets with lipstick on — even if you were a young bride — you would have risked being killed for not mourning such a hero. Everyone was devastated. They thought everything was lost. He had indoctrinated people with his frenzied ideology.'

Just in case it should pass them by, Enver's name was chiselled into the boulders of nearly every hillside, his teachings emblazoned across every block of flats and his slogans strung across the walls of every school and every factory.

One of the foremost writers on Albanian affairs, Anton Logoreci, observed that 'by exercising total control over the Communist Party, its subsidiary bodies and the secret police, Hoxha was able to operate in a situation in which no recognizable sanctions of any kind — moral, ethical, religious, political or judicial — were allowed to function. The party was elevated to the position of a tribal deity which was not only infinitely wise, far-sighted and benevolent but also implacable towards its enemies. If these were also the enemies of the leader this was because he incarnated all the party's wisdom and utopian aspirations.'

Hoxha's blind acceptance of Stalinism and his disastrous alliance with Mao's China paved the way for the economic collapse which has engulfed the country. In the end, his hatred for the West knew no limits. On roadside posters, in the universities and at work, his people could read just how deep-seated that enmity had become; 'We shall eat grass rather than surrender to imperialism.'

Top: Enver Hoxha talking 'knee to knee' to villagers under the oak tree.

Left: Enver Hoxha meets Chairman Mao in China, 1956.

Right: Enver Hoxha meets Stalin in Moscow, March 1949.

Bottom: Enver Hoxha dancing with 'Fatosa' (Elementary school-children) at Saranda, March 1978.

## THE YEARS OF TERROR

The seeds of the Communist tyranny which was to enslave Albania for close on half a century were sown during World War II. When Enver Hoxha came to power in the wake of the Nazi retreat of 1944, the Albanian Communist Party paraded its partisans as the sole liberators of the country from Italian and German occupation.

This, like so many of Hoxha's claims, was a distortion of the truth, but members of the other two resistance movements, *Balli Kombetar* (Nationalist) which had been led by Midhat Frasheri, and *Legaliteti* (a Royalist group) headed by Abas Kupi, were quickly denounced as 'Fascist collaborators' and 'traitors'.

Balli Kombetar was a moderate Republican coalition fighting for Albanian independence. Legaliteti wanted a restoration of King Zog's monarchy. As most of the Balli volunteers were peasants from the countryside, they were inclined to weigh the strength of any engagement against the possible harm that enemy reprisals might cause to their followers.

The Communists, under strong Yugoslav influence, were both aggressive and mobile, and certainly not averse to getting involved in more reckless resistance whatever the cost to the civilian population.

As their confidence grew, and secure in the knowledge of backing from both Tito and Stalin for their revolutionary goal, they decided to liquidate their nationalist opponents.

A British military mission sent into Albania during the

war years, led by Colonel Neil McLean and Major David Smiley, tried to bring the Communist and nationalist camps together so they could concentrate on the common enemy, Nazi Germany. It worked for a short time — particularly with the promise of arms — but then Hoxha's forces, who got by far the biggest share of the military supplies, split from the fragile alliance and pushed on with their twin objectives of national liberation and social revolution.

The civil war that followed was brutal, bloody and decisive. *Balli Kombetar* were defeated within the year and, after pursuing the retreating Nazis from Albania, the Communists set up their own Government in Tirana.

Those from the rival resistance movements who had failed to flee the country were now the first to feel the full weight of Hoxha's iron fist. In this new Albania all opposition from wherever it came would be crushed with the utmost brutality.

One of the founding members of *Balli Kombetar* was Hasan Dosti, the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court and also the country's Justice Minister in the early years of the war. He had been responsible for compiling the new civil code, the first time it had been altered since the end of Turkish rule.

Dosti, who had graduated at the Law Faculty in Paris, was one of the country's best respected judges and a fierce nationalist. Fearing the consequences of Hoxha's triumph he escaped first to Italy, and then on to America with his second son, Luan, who — though just 17 — had fought alongside his father in the civil war.

In New York Hasan Dosti was chosen to head the National Committee for a Free Albania, part of the assembly of Captive European Nations seeking to undermine Communist rule in Eastern Europe. His intention had always been to return to Albania.

In Tirana he had left behind four sons and three daughters. He would never set eyes on any of them again. What's more, all efforts to discover their whereabouts came to nothing. For forty-seven years he could not be sure whether any, or all, of them were alive or dead. When con-

tact was finally established in 1991, Mr. Dosti had reached the ripe old age of 96 and was just weeks from death.

On 29 November 1944 — the very day of Tirana's liberation from the Nazis — Hasan's wife, Fetije, was shot dead by the Germans who then set fire to the Dosti home. The children escaped only minutes before the roof collapsed.

The Nazis gone, it was now the Communists who turned on the family. The eldest son, Victor, was arrested at a students' rally for denouncing the Soviet Union as 'red imperialists'. The original sentence was five years imprisonment, but for being the son of a nationalist he was condemned to a further forty-two years in labour camps.

The rest of the family fared no better. They were all rounded up, accused of being traitors of the State, stripped of all their money and possessions and sent into hard labour for life. It would be 1991 before any of them would see the outside world again.

During their forty-seven years in internment, six of the family were married and fifteen children and six grand-children were born in the prison camps. Even the third generation were forced to endure the unspeakable horrors of what came to be known as 'Hoxha's Hell'.

The world knew little of such places. In the eyes of the Albanian authorities they did not exist. Human rights groups could gather no information save from a few survivors who managed to flee abroad.

In their desire to throw some light on the extent of their suffering, some of the more notable inmates, and ordinary country folk too, have been prepared to tell their stories for the first time. Just sitting and listening to their accounts left me mentally and physically drained. The reality of a lifetime's experience in such grim and barbaric conditions has left many of them in a state of permanent shock. It will be a long time before they can fully trust another human being again. This is the dreadful legacy of the Hoxha years.

Victor Dosti is now head of the Albanian Commission investigating the grievances of former political prisoners. Initial research indicates at least 60,000 were gaoled or interned in labour camps by the Communist regime — more

than a third of these may not have survived. Written records have been asked for, but none can be found. Executions too, ran into tens of thousands. All this in a country which, up to 1960, had a population of little over one and a half million people.

The Dosti family had been one of the wealthiest in all Albania. As young children they enjoyed all life's luxuries. Now everything had gone. A life of enforced enslavement seemed unimaginable. Their mother dead, their father in exile, they had to look to each other for the strength and courage to withstand a regime intent on breaking and dehumanizing even the most hardened inmate. The work often began at 5am and continued until dark. It was physical, constant and exhausting and always carried out under the eyes of guards looking for the slightest excuse to round on their subjects and indulge in an orgy of violence.

The repression, the beatings and the mental torture to which Victor was subjected in prison were still preferable to life in the camps.

'In gaol you had only yourself to worry about, but for a man to see his wife, daughter and grandchildren — everyone he loved — being beaten by every policeman around . . . it was quite unbearable. Your children were asking for bread and you couldn't give it to them. How can anyone suffer that?'

Children born in the camps were given only elementary schooling. They were 'non persons' with no hope whatso-ever of higher education or a release into the outside world. For the 'crimes' of their grandfathers, they were forced into the same cruel and sorrowful existence, beaten into submission at every turn, deprived of the joys of their youth and faced with a life of hopelessness and despair.

Proper medical care was non-existent. A doctor or nurse was summoned to the camps only when the guards deemed it necessary and then it was mostly to tend the needs of their own families.

Victor's wife, Hyrije, gave birth to their daughter on a dirt track. Her child survived, but many born in similar circumstances did not. As we talked about the experience,

her girl, Arta (meaning 'golden'), lowered her head, tears streaming down her face.

'Poor thing, she feels she has no birthplace and she's never been to a proper school,' Hyrije explained, 'but I tell her to cheer up for she means everything to us. Now this is over, we hope she will realize she's just as important as any other girl.'

In the labour camps human tragedy became part and parcel of everyday life. Illness or disease were ignored as if they did not exist. Those from persecuted families reporting sick would still be rounded up by the guards and sent out into the fields or the marshes or down the mines. Old men collapsed under the weight of the extra loads the police kept piling on to their backs, people were drowned in the swamps to terrorize others, while savage beatings were the inevitable result of failing to fulfil the quota of work for the day.

Hyrije's sister and her husband were killed while in transit between camps in the south of the country. Fearing internees at the coastal prison of Porto Palermo might escape via the Adriatic Sea, the authorities decided to transfer them to another camp at Tepelena, situated high up in a mountain pass. When the lorry arrived to collect the prisoners the driver complained to the guards that he had experienced brake failure. He was instructed to continue.

On a dangerous bend his vehicle ran out of control and capsized into a ditch. Fadil and Niaya Petrela, anticipating what was to happen, instantly picked up their children, clasping them tightly in their arms to form a protective shield against the frightful effects of the impending crash. Their swift and courageous action saved the children, but both parents died within minutes of the impact. The guards ordered their bodies to be buried by the side of the road.

For their hard labour the internees could earn a maximum of eighty pence a month, barely enough to buy bread. Women forced to till the land by hand were given just one hour's break in their dawn to dusk workload. It was usually spent knitting something for the children.

Returning home in the dark to their crumbling windowless shacks, the only nightly protection against the cold

winds that swept through the makeshift roofs of sticks and plastic sheeting was a threadbare blanket.

The cycle of terror was never ending. Frequently the guards would call someone out by name and ask him to run an errand. Some never returned from such missions. Others were taken to a hostel and tortured for days and then asked to undertake a spying mission for the Sigurimi.

Men were forced to look on helplessly as their wives were paraded before them. A cat was placed inside their dress which was then bound tightly at both ends. 'Imagine,' says Victor Dosti, 'what a cat will do to try to free itself in such circumstances. It was just insufferable.

'In one camp the authorities forced a wife to give a false testimony against her husband to whom they had taken an obvious dislike. Afterwards she strangled herself with a sheet, her husband died in the investigation room, and their five children were orphaned.'

After close on half a century of internal exile, the Dosti family now have a rented flat on the top floor of a multistorey block in Tirana. Even that was only made possible by the arrival of their brother, Luan, from the United States. While they had languished in their living hell, the brother who fled to America had become a business high-flyer in charge of international relations for a big armaments factory in Los Angeles. Visiting the rest of his family in the squalor of Gradishte Camp just before their release, he simply could not come to terms with what confronted him. He did, however, have some exciting news — their father, Hasan Dosti, was still alive.

At 96 years of age, Mr. Dosti picked up the telephone to take the most important trans-Atlantic call of his life. At the other end of the line the eight children whose voices he'd last heard in 1944. At first, there were only tears, and then . . .

'Where have you all been? Are you all well . . . still alive?'

'Yes, father . . . and you now have fifteen grandchildren and one great grandchild, all born in prison camps. You must know, Dad, that we never regretted for one minute that



The Dosti family receive a letter from their relatives in America.

we suffered for your sake. On the contrary, we have always been proud because we knew you were cherishing a noble ideal for which you sacrificed mother, yourself and your family. This is what made all the suffering worthwhile. We just hope you will live long enough to see us.'

He did not. Such was the shock of speaking to his family again after forty-seven years of silence that Hasan Dosti collapsed within a matter of weeks. He died though, in the safe knowledge that each and every one of his children had miraculously survived.

Yet for hundreds of former internees there is simply no escape. Free to walk out of the gates since the coming of democracy, they remain trapped and abandoned in their ramshackle huts. With no money, no home and no family on the other side of the fence, their prospects for a new life are virtually non-existent, so they are left right where they are.

To reach the Podas' two-roomed shack which they built from hardened mud, straw and a few broken canes, I had to negotiate the filth-strewn dust tracks of Savra Camp, a few miles outside the city of Lushnje.

Stripped of their watchtowers, machine guns and electric fences, these are still frightful places. Innocent children were standing in open sewers, drawing water from the standpipes.

Sadiq and his wife Verore invited me inside the 'home' they share with their two sons and their wives and two grandchildren. There were so many gaping holes in the hut that there was really very little difference from sitting outdoors.

I handed over a few sweets for the children. They were gratefully received, but I had an uncomfortable feeling the Podas would have preferred a bag of rice so that everyone could enjoy a square meal.

'You remember those packets of dried baby food a British charity delivered to the camp last June? Look, we still have some left. Every day I mark the outside of the carton with a pencil,' said Verore, indicating a series of rings, each one two teaspoonfuls apart.

I found myself beginning to cry. 'But you got that packet three months ago. It was meant for babies, not for people like yourselves.'

'Well, that's all we've got. We'll just have to make it last out as long as we can.'

Sadiq Poda was just 23 years old when he was arrested. He was now 72. Forty-seven years spent in prison and labour camps, yet the best that could be provided for a broken old man was a packet of baby food. I was devastated.

You have to go back to the early days of 1945 to find the 'crime' responsible for a life of unending pain and utter degradation. Like forty other young volunteers from the village of Erseke in South-East Albania, Poda joined the ranks of the national forces which were drawn into the civil war against Hoxha's victorious partisans.

Defeat meant that Poda and his friends now joined the many thousands of 'war criminals' whom Hoxha, through a series of show trials, wanted dealt with expeditiously. In Erseke, seven were summarily sentenced to death, the others condemned to prison or special labour camps set up to deal with such 'enemies of the people'.

Poda was sent to the prison of Burrel. Even in the summertime, it takes hours to reach the place, travelling along a winding road, and climbing ever steeper through tunnels cut into the granite rock that straddles the mountain passes. The journey is one of the most breathtaking in all Albania, passing through a magnificent landscape of virgin forests, shimmering lakes and sheer cliffs before finally levelling out on entry to Burrel itself.

The prison is just half a mile from the town centre, but here inmates were condemned to a life of unspeakable horror. Others featured in these pages will tell of their experiences. Poda has his own grisly memories.

Of the 440 prisoners held within its white concrete walls on the day he entered. Poda claims 300 did not survive. Starvation, an endless cycle of torture and beatings, disease and the sheer cold sapped the strength of even the most hardened men. Death became inevitable. In case anyone had the slightest doubt about the prison's purpose, a huge sign was hung over the gate. It read: 'This is Burrel where people enter but never leave.'



Burrel . . . prison of extermination.

Poda survived on 500 grams of bread a day plus a little salt. To get water, he and his three cell mates were sent to a well inside the prison compound. The men linked their towels in rope-like fashion and then lowered them slowly into the well in the hope that a few drops of water would soak into the material. When the towels came up they were completely red. The water was polluted. Yet without a mouthful they knew they would surely die. Back in their cell they squeezed the towels into a dish. The filthy sediment eventually dropped to the bottom and each man in turn took a sip from the top of the dish.

The beatings continued daily, weakening body and spirit. Such was the desperation for food that when a prisoner died, those sharing his cell would try to keep news of his demise from the prison guards so they could share his daily ration. A favourite trick was to put a lighted cigarette in the dead man's mouth to allay any suspicions. Next day, they would put him under a blanket, pretending he was asleep, but when the smell became overpowering, they had to hand the body over and suffer another beating for their pains.

Poda says he buried several inmates with his own hands. Many prisoners have no known grave, for the hole their colleagues dug was just 40 centimetres deep. Placed in such shallow graves, the bodies were savaged by the prison dogs.

Prisoners suffering from tuberculosis found themselves removed to a special room. When they died, they were taken outside the camp perimeter for burial beneath a cherry tree. Albanian poet, Arshi Pipa, who himself contracted the disease in Burrel, recorded such grim events which were to coin the saying 'he's gone to the cherries'.

In a collection of poems written during his desperate years in prison, Pipa also touched on the widening gulf between the unfortunate prisoner and his family who by necessity had to get on with the job of daily living.

Our sisters and daughters are grown up and now have children of their own. They come to visit us with their sons, daughters and babies in mothers' arms: living icons come to the grave of the living dead. Some look at us in fear, others in sheer horror. To them we are relics of another world, strange specimens carefully preserved in zoological cages. We're all forsaken and forgotten. The pity of our womenfolk, kept alive by love which no suffering can destroy, our only link with the real world: the smile of the child in its mother's arms a solitary ray of hope falling upon our tombstones.

Burrel was certainly no respecter of persons. In the prewar years, the Prime Minister of the Zog administration, Koça Kotta, designed a new prison block of twelve cells which had no access to sunlight. Later imprisoned as an enemy of the Hoxha regime, Kotta was to die under the most brutal torture inside part of his own creation.

After serving a six-year sentence, Sadiq Poda was called to the prison commander's office, handed 30 leks for his bus fare, and told he could leave. 'I just couldn't believe I was free. Moving towards the gates, I kept looking round. I believed I'd be re-arrested on the same trumped up charge and be sent back to hell once again.'

He was, but it came ten days later just when he was trying to adjust to village life again. The Sigurimi had other ideas. 'You're too near to the Greek border here,' they told him, 'and we're frightened you may try to flee. Pack your bags, we have other plans for you.'

Poda was put on to an army lorry with seven other young men from his village, and driven straight to a labour camp at Berat. They were told 'You'll be here for five years. After that, you'll have to do another five.'

The Government was building a new military airfield and Poda's job was to load and then unload sacks of cement. If the guards considered the prisoners were not working hard enough, they chained them hand and foot and threw them back in their room situated in an old stable.

'We were told "this is sabotage", and our bread and water was withheld for twenty-four hours."

That original five-year sentence has now stretched to forty-one years in internal exile and there is still no sign of a way out. Poda married Verore in Savra camp. She was just 19. He was 39 and a 'sack of bones'. The family is Muslim. Despite so many years of pain they have not lost their faith. 'We go to bed at night and get up in the morning with Allah on our lips. We're begging for God's mercy all the time. Maybe we are tiring Him out.'

In the neighbouring shack crudely put together with mud, a few pieces of old timber and animal excreta allowed to dry in the sun, Jahja and Hiqmete Kaleci recalled a life of even more terrifying proportions.

Jahja too had fought for the nationals, primarily against the Nazis but later against the Communists. Arrested almost on the day that Hoxha took power, he had been married for just a year. His son Sazan was only one week old.

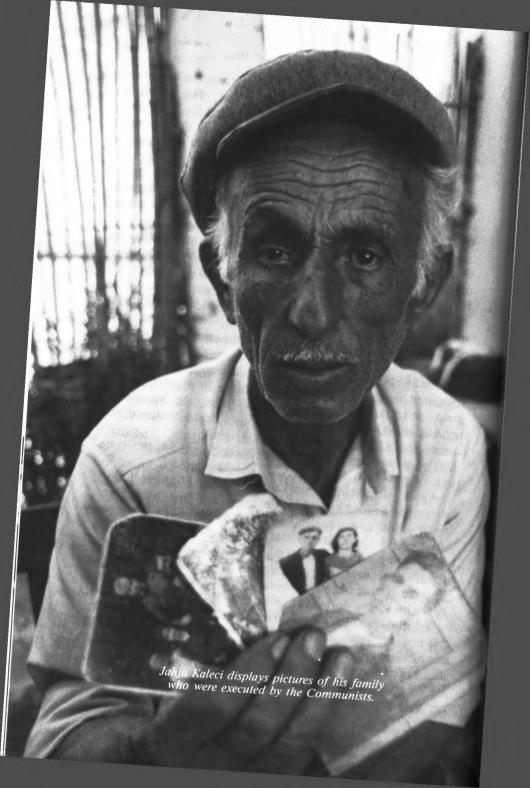
With two uncles, his brother and his wife's brother, he was sentenced to death as 'a traitor'. Jahja was also accused of having killed a man in a nearby mountain village. His wife, in a desperate bid to save him from the firing squad, personally rounded up every witness the court claimed had presented written evidence against him. To a man, and at great personal risk, they told the judge the statements bearing their names were false. Jahja's death sentence was commuted to life imprisonment.

The other members of the family condemned at the same time were not so fortunate. All were executed.

Again, displaying remarkable courage, Hiqmete Kaleci determined to find out where the executions had taken place so she could give her brother and brother-in-law a proper burial. After making discreet enquiries, she found their bodies dumped in the Forest of Voskopoja. Two coffins were brought by horse into the woods, and with her mother, Hiqmete buried the two young men in secret.

'It had been forty days since their execution and both were still covered in blood. When I wiped my brother's face and lips, his teeth fell out into my hands. Not content with machine-gunning these young lads to death, they had also shot them through the head.'

When her husband was sent to prison, Hiqmete sold all her dowry to buy food to take to the gaol. 'I brought pie,



but sometimes it was eaten by the guards. Visiting Jahja was a sickening experience. His feet were dripping blood from the torture. When I took his socks home to wash, I had to use a piece of glass to scrape the blood and grime away.'

Jahja survived twenty years in prison before being sent, with Hiqmete, into internal exile at Savra Camp. Tragedy though, had continued to stalk them at every turn. Their son, Sazan, who had been their only joy in life, was killed in the most appalling circumstances shortly after his eleventh birthday. He had been playing in the fields with a group of young friends when they stumbled across a hidden grenade. He picked it up. There was an explosion and Sazan died instantly.

'Will anyone in your country understand the pain we've been through?' Hiqmete enquired gently as she tried to stem the flood of tears. I stretched out my hand and clasped her palms as a sign of reassurance. 'I'm sure you've often felt the world has shown indifference to your plight, but I know many people in Britain will want to share in your suffering and do what they can to help. The problem has been that most of us have been quite ignorant about what has gone on here over so many years. Even to many Albanians, all this is coming as a very big shock.'

Hiqmete hurried inside her tiny shack and returned clutching a photograph of a tall, handsome young man. She explained that after her son's death, her sister and brother-in-law had desperately wanted to ease the pain. They told her: 'We have two healthy children — a boy and a girl — who both love you as much as us. Choose one for your-selves.'

It was, of course, a decision the Kalecis could not face. 'If you really want to help us,' Hiqmete suggested to her sister, 'then have another baby for us. You're still young enough'. She did, and at six months the Kalecis adopted a beautiful baby boy. They called him by the same name as the son they had lost.

Sazan grew up in the labour camp and when freedom arrived in 1991 he went off to find a job as a waiter in

Greece. His parents encouraged him to seek a new life, but were devastated by his departure.

'I have been going crazy for my son. I sat down and cried for weeks. I thought I might never see him again, but today I received a letter to say he's coming back next week. Now I am the happiest creature in the world.'

It seemed the most appropriate moment to say farewell. Higmete ran after me down the dusty path holding a cooking apple in each hand. 'You have two children, please take them, it's all we have.'

If these brutalized yet courageous people have been stripped of everything else, they have surrendered neither dignity nor pride. Two lost generations. Their hopes now are only for their grandchildren.

#### ABOLISHING GOD

By the beginning of 1967 Albania's cultural revolution was under way. Determined to close the gulf between ordinary people and the Communist Party, Enver Hoxha embraced with great enthusiasm the revolutionary doctrines of China's Mao Tse-tung and set about adapting them for use in his own country.

The time had now come to widen the party's links with the masses, win them over, mobilize and re-educate them and ensure that everyone rigidly followed the party line.

The bureaucratic machine was to be pruned. Intellectuals — writers and artists — were sent out of the cities and into the countryside, under orders to get closer to the common people. Many were dispatched to collective farms, others to mines and factories. It was all part of a determined effort to bring them to heel and ensure their undivided attention was focused on the themes dictated by the party.

Life in every workplace, no matter how harsh or monotonous, had to be painted as the creation of a new socialist world where man, imbued with a high revolutionary spirit, was ready to accomplish heroic feats for the homeland.

Since Albania's break with the Soviet Union, Soviet cultural influences were condemned as being as ideologically dangerous as those of the West. Centralized State direction of the entire educational system was strengthened. Textbooks were revised and teaching at every level firmly anchored in Marxist-Leninist doctrines.

There was also a new place for women. No longer were they to be oppressed and exploited, but actively encouraged to become members of the general labour force. The end of their role as second class citizens also brought new responsibilities to wage the struggle against imperialism and revisionism with the utmost zeal. Ominously, the propagation of religion in all its forms was cited as one of the main reasons for women having been kept in perpetual slavery.

Hoxha's final onslaught on religious practices had begun. The results were devastating, the persecution relentless. Within weeks, Hoxha was to act in a way no other twentieth-century leader, including Hitler and Stalin, had dared. He abolished God. Albania became the first selfproclaimed atheist State in the world and Hoxha was to describe it as one of his greatest achievements.

Teams of party activists were whipped up into a frenzy and dispatched the length and breadth of the country to cajole, bully and intimidate people into giving up their religious beliefs. By the end of the year more than two thousand mosques, churches, monasteries and seminaries had been shut down. Many were demolished or burnt to the ground. Others were turned into warehouses, cinemas or gymnasiums.

A decree of the Central Committee of the Party of Labour (the renamed Communist Party), revoked the charters under which the three religious communities — Muslim, Orthodox and Roman Catholic — operated. It was a direct violation of the 1946 constitution under which all citizens were guaranteed freedom of conscience and faith.

Hoxha called on 'the sharp knife of the party' to be used in the class struggle against religious ideology. 'Religion is opium to the people and we must do our utmost to ensure this truth is understood by everyone, even by those who are poisoned by it. We shall have to cure them.'

The priests and haxhis (Muslim imams) were described in derogatory terms. 'The clergy, save for the Catholics, are ignorant. The religion they practise and spread is supported through an archaic liturgy and prayers learnt by heart . . . . In the case of the haxhis without even understanding their content, let alone their philosophical interpretation.'

The Catholics, though much smaller in number, were

perceived to present a greater threat. The Catholic Church had played an important role in preserving the Albanian language and cultural traditions during the long period of Ottoman rule, an historic contribution that the Communists had obviously decided should be removed from popular memory. More importantly, the Catholic Church in Albania was seen as representing the Occidental culture. Its clergy, almost without exception, were scholars and highly-cultured people. They had studied abroad in Austria, Italy, and Germany and, until 1944, the Church ran seminaries and schools in Shkoder, two for boys and one for girls. They had also published their own newspaper and a whole range of religious books and literature.

All this, Hoxha rightly considered, presented a very difficult obstacle to his policy of 'wiping them off the face of the earth'.

All the people's patriotic and revolutionary spirit, he declared, would be required for the fight. They would do well to remember their history.

'Islam has been the ideology of the Turkish occupier. The Orthodox religion has been the ideology of the Greek chauvinists who have occupied the country in the past, and Catholicism — with the Vatican as its centre — has been the ideology of the Italian invaders, Austrian Imperialism and Italian Fascism.'

The wholesale closure of mosques and churches was but the third and final stage of a venomous campaign to crush religion almost from the moment the Communists came to power. The ferocity with which it was carried out exemplified Hoxha's unwillingness to tolerate the existence of any outside institutions which even in the mildest way challenged the authority of his dictatorship.

The Muslim community, who accounted for 70 per cent of the population, found itself under attack as early as 1945. Instruction in the faith was actively discouraged and soon mosques began to close. Mustafa Varoshi, the head of the Islamic community in the city of Durres, refused to accede to the demands of State officials, was arrested and died under torture in Durres Prison. In all, more than one

hundred haxhis suffered varying degrees of persecution. Of those, twenty were tortured to death and several others hanged themselves or committed other forms of suicide in gaol.

The present head of Albania's Muslims, Haxhi Hafizi Sabri Koçi, was imprisoned for twenty-one years, his distorted fingers a painful reminder of the suffering to which he was subjected for so long. 'I refused to recant my faith. They tried to beat me into submission. My flesh came off piece by piece. I never saw my family. We lost 1,300 mosques — completely destroyed, but now we are building again.'

The Orthodox Church, the second largest religious group, whose members numbered about a fifth of the Albanian population, was pushed into replacing its independently-minded leaders with bishops who would subscribe to the main policies of the party and be willing to develop close relations with the Russian Orthodox Church in Moscow.

It was to be the Catholic Church though which was to experience the regime's savagery on a scale as yet unprecedented. In 1945, the clergy numbered one hundred and eighty. Within four years, more than half of them had been exterminated. Fifty were executed, the others died after sometimes years of brutal and systematic torture.

Hoxha accused them of everything; collaborators of the Italian and Nazi Fascists, defenders of reactionary forces in the country and initiators of organizations intent on overthrowing the people's power.

This is the story of one priest who survived twenty-eight years of one of the worst cycles of sustained cruelty perpetrated in the second half of the twentieth century. The same God that gave him the courage to survive, he says, is now enabling him to forgive his persecutors.

Zef Pllumi's life as a young Franciscan was subjected to the first onslaught of the fanatical and remorseless campaign to destroy Catholicism as early as 1946. The police laid siege to the seminary which the Order used as their own living quarters. One man only was allowed out once a day

with the police to buy food and bring it back to the dining hall where the Franciscans were being kept hostage, incommunicado with everyone.

As the days passed, so the pressure was stepped up relentlessly. First despised, then ridiculed and physically abused, their ordeal was, as yet, only in its early bearable stages.

The Sigurimi and government officials burst through a back door carrying arms and ammunition. They opened cupboards and cloakrooms, hiding bullets under piles of books and openly slipping rifles into wardrobes full of cloaks and cassocks. Then, in the middle of the night, they surreptitiously crept into the church, stacking the vestry and ante-rooms with as many weapons as they could muster.

At Sunday Mass the Sigurimi returned, displayed 'their find' in front of the congregation and accused the clergy of conspiring to overthrow the Hoxha government. 'What more evidence do you need of your priests' intention to kill our leaders?' they would scream at the terrified worshippers. It was a very adroit way of unnerving the faithful and they hoped would speed their programme of church closures.

Pllumi says those who did not know the clergy were cheated by the propaganda. The accusations only served to bolster the courage of the true believers. 'It was like a two-edged knife. On the one hand the regime damaged us a great deal, on the other they publicly announced that we were enemies of Communism . . . but then Communism was never deeply embedded in the hearts of the people. Religion most certainly was.'

Father Pllumi prepared for the inevitable. He was just 22 years old when he was arrested, charged with the possession of arms and plotting an insurrection.

The population of Shkoder in 1946 was a mere 30,000, yet there were twelve prisons. Hoxha's iron rule had begun in earnest. Enemies — real or imaginary — were now in the hands of the chief instrument of his terror campaign, the Sigurimi.

The Franciscans were held hostage in their own seminary. Hence the secret police were content to deal with

them right where they were. The sacred building was turned into a prison overnight. The dining room became a torture chamber. 'The agony . . . the screams . . . went on day and night. Hundreds — believers as well as priests — were tortured inside the House of God. There was no mercy. It was as if the Sigurimi were competing with one another to find ever more ingenious and dastardly forms of torture'

One of the most common practices was to tie the prisoner with a rope under his armpits and then suspend him from a plum tree, rather like a trussed chicken in a butcher's shop. This torture was reserved especially for stifling summer days and presented the only occasions when the unfortunate victims were allowed to leave their inner prison. More often the priests were suspended from the stair railing, their toes only partially touching the ground. This was called 'the break or the resting'. What they meant by this, Pllumi says, was 'think it over now'.

'We were tied up like this for days on end. There was no respite. We had no food, and all the time an armed guard was standing over us. It was impossible to sleep in this position and even if we tried, a bucket of water would be thrown over us. Twice a day we were dragged to the toilet just for a couple of minutes. We wanted to lengthen the time, but they dragged us back again. Sometimes we were suspended like this for well over a week.'

After the Franciscans were untied, they were taken to the investigation room for 'intensive interrogation'. This began with hour-long beatings with batons and iron bars. Their bodies became so bloodied that many of the priests were unrecognizable, even to their friends, when they were thrown out of the room.

The beatings over, the prisoners were then subjected to the electric shock treatment. Live wires were attached behind both ears, and the guards used the handle of an oldfashioned telephone to generate the current.

'It was terrible. They wanted to terrorize us because they had no proof. "We know everything," they'd shout, "so let's have it out or you will die under torture." Those who could take no more and admitted to things they had not

done were treated in one of two ways. Some were executed at once, but for others there was no relief, the torture just went on.'

Another particularly cruel form of torture was to place fleas on the prisoners' shaven heads while their hands were tied up to prevent them scratching themselves. Under such conditions, some just broke down completely.

The psychological torture took just as heavy a toll. One method was so simple to administer, yet it drove most of its wretched victims to insanity. 'I was asked to stand upright against the wall. A guard then drew a circle at the precise point which corresponded with the position of my nose. A small hole was drilled and my nose pushed into it. I was then ordered to stand there without moving for ten days. I was given neither food nor water and sleep was forbidden. If I collapsed, I was beaten and then pushed back into position. Mentally, I don't know how I survived. Many of my dearest friends went mad within a week.'

As soon as the Sigurimi believed a prisoner's spirit had been destroyed they threw him a piece of paper and waited for his signature to the charges they had drawn up. Pllumi could not be broken. He was released after more than three years of interrogation under the most sadistic torture. 'At that time, freedom meant absolutely nothing to me because it was also prison on the outside.'

Hoxha's campaign against religious beliefs was entering its second stage. In 1951, after two years of negotiations between the Government and representatives of the clergy, they reached a modus vivendi in which the Church was virtually reduced to a body without hands and feet. Seminaries were shut down and no religious teaching was allowed. This meant that the Church could, in effect, continue only temporarily for, with youth excluded and no new priests under training, the Church was surely doomed to die.

Even persecution in the Soviet Union had not reached such a restrictive level. Years before, Stalin actually urged Hoxha to take a cautious line. Hoxha pushed on regardless. Everyone going to church was followed and kept under constant surveillance. The secret police were ordered to listen intently to sermons and any other religious guidance offered to the faithful. Every word was carefully analysed to ensure it conformed to the party line. False witnesses were recruited to accuse the priests of having gone beyond what was permissable.

'Try to imagine,' says Pllumi, 'what kind of Church we were presiding over. We were the lambs, how could we fight the wolves?'

The parishioners gave their own answer. Intimidation and threats had failed to clear the pews. People were turning up in greater numbers than ever. Churches destroyed during the first stage of the persecution were being rebuilt by believers who were prepared to make all kinds of sacrifices to keep them going. Far from 'throttling the Church at source,' Hoxha's persecution was helping to deepen the faith of many Christians for they saw his regime was ever bending them. He fared no better with the Muslims.

By 1967 Hoxha had become exasperated. There was now no other answer than to shut down the churches and mosques completely.

Zef Pllumi was arrested again, accused this time along with several other priests from Shkoder as being 'spies of the Italian Embassy'. Pllumi refused to accept the accusation, so the authorities came up with another one. They said he was preparing to flee and then go to the United Nations to protest about Church closures. The tortures and beatings started all over again.

The sentence this time — twenty-five years imprisonment with hard labour. In Tirana gaol he shared a cell with one of Hoxha's former generals, Gjin Marku. He had been condemned on charges of plotting against the regime and was later to die in the notorious prison of Burrel.

Marku had been a member of the Central Committee of the Communist Party and was educated in the Soviet Union. He had accompanied Hoxha on visits to Moscow and was used as an interpreter during meetings with Stalin. Marku told Pllumi of some of the conversations in the Kremlin between the two leaders. On one occasion Stalin had told Hoxha: 'Your people are very small in number. If you cannot manage to win their sympathy, you had better resign.'

Pllumi was sent to seven prisons and labour camps at Spac, Rreps, Vlora, Ballsh, Zejmen, Saranda and Tirana. Life in the camps, he said, was worse than internment. The work was back-breaking, the torture and punishments barbaric and the living conditions inhuman. The most crucial factor in the fight to survive was the attitude of the camp commander. He could either make life 'a living hell' or ease the suffering. The camp rules stipulated eight hours work a day, but many forced prisoners to work twelve and sometimes sixteen hours. Some commanders saved the lives of their prisoners, others speeded their deaths.

'At Vlora we had to drain the swamp with our bare hands and a few basic implements. There was no modern equipment. We were beaten black and blue if we did not work hard enough.'

Many who were sent to the labour camp at Spac died as physical and mental wrecks. There the prisoners were made to work like animals in the copper mines. The sixteenhour shifts — in appalling conditions, with little food and often nothing to drink — took a heavy toll. Conditions became so bad in May 1973 that Pllumi and several other prisoners decided that whatever the risks, they would have to make some sort of protest. The supply of water to the camp flowed from the mines. It was polluted and undrinkable. 'Can you imagine working sixteen hours in such dreadful heat without a proper break, with inefficient machinery and living under terror . . . and there isn't a drop of water to drink? Our bodies couldn't take any more. We were going mad just for a sip of water.'

That week Pllumi was moved to another camp. The transfer saved his life. Just three days later — now at their wits' end — the prisoners at Spac rebelled. The army was called in and five of the ringleaders were executed in front of the other inmates. The others who had taken part in the uprising were badly beaten. Zef Pllumi's name was read

out too. When the police discovered he had been transferred, another answering to the name Zef was tortured instead. Conditions in the other camps were equally bad. Suicides were commonplace.

'God kept me alive. I wanted to die. I just could not endure any more. Many times, I was on my knees begging God to give me death. I watched many of my fellow prisoners break down completely, mentally and physically. They usually said even if we were to be released, we would be better off dead. So they just threw themselves on to the wire fences around the camps where they were instantly machine-gunned by the guards. This was their release.'

In 1984 Father Pllumi began to experience serious health problems. One morning, just four minutes before roll call, he suffered a major heart attack. He slumped to the floor of his cell, unable to summon help or move even a few inches towards the door.

Death, he believed, was now only minutes away.

Under prison rules, anyone failing to present himself for roll call had to be in possession of a doctor's note. Guards were ordered to check each cell in turn to ensure that everybody was out.

Pllumi's door was pushed open. Towering over him was the most brutal guard he had ever encountered. A man whose inhumanity was notorious.

'I can see you're dying. Does the doctor know you are like this?'

'No, he doesn't. I could not get up.'

The guard looked down once more at the helpless prisoner lying in a heap on the floor.

'I'll have to finish my rounds, but then I'll go to the doctor and tell him to come and see you.'

Though in great pain, Pllumi felt at ease for a few short moments because for the first time he was witnessing a brute showing a spark of compassion. Death, he prayed, would come quickly, but now with life ebbing from him, the sad and saintly Franciscan had no inhibitions about speaking his mind. 'It is such a surprise to see you behaving like this, for you have always been a monster to other people.

Think of all those prisoners as humans . . . they all have families.'

The guard stiffened, his tone of voice displaying a dismissive arrogance. 'I do everything according to the rules.'

'Whose orders are you following?'

'The orders of our great leader, Comrade Enver Hoxha,' he replied sharply.

'But don't you know Hoxha is a madman and all the world has ostracized him? Yet here you are, following the orders of a madman.'

'These are also the orders of the Party,' the guard insisted.

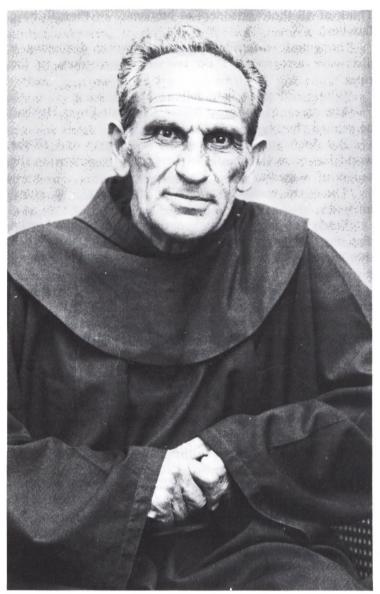
'Surely you know,' Pllumi continued, 'that when Hoxha dies, the Party won't continue two days without him. When that happens, all these prisoners will come out and demand justice.'

With evidence like this the guard could have had Pllumi executed almost at once. Instead, he left the cell in silence and returned with the prison doctor. The priest's life was saved and the guard's general attitude showed an immediate and dramatic change.

In 1990, after his release, Zef Pllumi was appointed parish priest of St. Anthony's church in Tirana. Desecrated and vandalized in the sixties, the church is being lovingly restored. Mothers — their young children in tow — are to be seen endlessly dusting and polishing while their husbands nail the timbers of the old wooden pews back together again.

Late one evening in June 1992, Father Pllumi was just preparing to retire for the night when he was disturbed by short, intermittent rings of the presbytery bell. Opening the door, he found a tall, middle-aged man in obvious distress. He was shaking all over, his face pinched and pallid.

'It was only when he stepped into the sitting room that I recognized his features. The sadist who once beat and tortured me and then had saved my life was now begging for forgiveness. I listened, I counselled and I forgave. Even in my most difficult moments, I had never harboured thoughts



Zef Pllumi who miraculously survived twenty-eight years of the worst cruelty imaginable.



The Albanian countryside, 1992. Sowing seed potatoes in the foothills of the Albanian mountains.





Urban transport 1992!









Daily chaos in Albania's largest bread factory.



Fight for bread.

Father Christmas returns to Albania for the first time in thirty years.





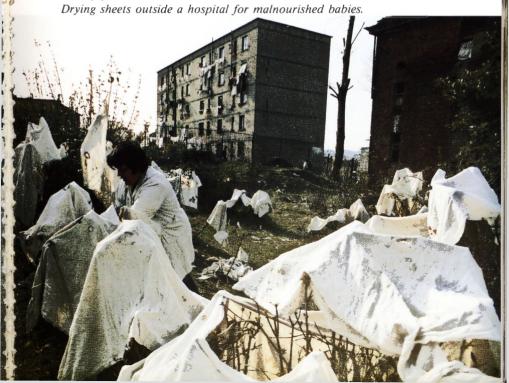
Opulence . . . the Queen's bedroom in the palace of King Zog.

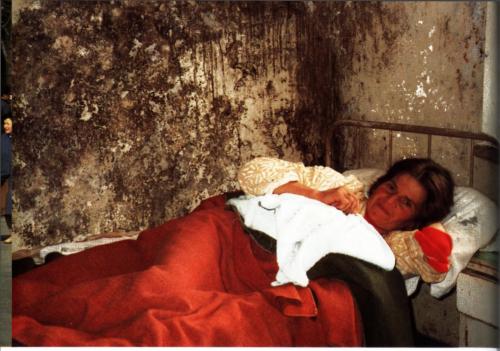
The multi-million-pound Hoxha Museum. Opened 1988. Closed 1991.





A mother's lot in rural Albania . . . washing clothes at a communal stand-pipe.





About to give birth . . . in the labour ward of Shkoder Maternity Hospital.

Hospital life in Elbasan.



of revenge. Indeed, I prayed to God to influence the minds of my persecutors . . . to turn those animals into human beings.'

That prison guard is now a regular attender at Sunday Mass — so too are members of the Sigurimi, the police and the army, all of whom had been prime players in the job of eradicating religion from Albanian soil.

The full horror of what happened may never be known. One priest was executed for daring to baptize a baby, four Franciscans were burnt to death when a church and convent were set on fire during the height of the cultural revolution and an untold number of priests, haxhis and ordinary believers laid down their lives for their faith.

In December 1972 Pope Paul VI said the Church in Albania 'seems relegated not only to the peace of silent suffering but to the peace of death. With the shepherds stricken and the flock dispersed, one cannot see what human hope remains for the Church.'

If it was a remark designed to try to focus worldwide attention on what was happening in Albania, then it could also have been shamefully construed as indicting a distinct lack of faith on the part of the Vatican. As Monsignor Nikolle Troshani, the new leader of the Catholic Church in Albania declares: 'It is extremely difficult to subdue people's free belief in God by any means, even savagery and violence. This voluntary faith survives everything. Believers who did not banish their trust in God for a moment may be proud of this.'

Father Zef Pllumi's story is a testimony of such faith and hope. Some of his former enemies now come to listen to the message, not to destroy it. He treats them with love and the best of feelings because he says he can see their hearts full of repentance. Therein lies the hope for Albania. The moral and spiritual cleansing the country needs will be achieved not through revenge, only through pardon.

'To err is human,' Pllumi tells his congregation, 'to forgive is divine.'

## THE FIGHT TO REMAIN A MAN

A matter of weeks before Betty Boothroyd, the popular and highly respected Labour Member for West Bromwich, was celebrating her election as the first woman Speaker of The House of Commons, the new democratic Parliament in Albania was taking its first significant step towards addressing the growing feeling of national guilt over the years of Communist oppression.

If the former Tiller girl was being seen as the ideal matriarch to call British MPs to order, then the small, slight figure chosen to chair the Albanian Chamber could not in his wildest dreams have contemplated the role in which the spring of 92 would so improbably cast him.

Once condemned to death for daring to challenge Enver Hoxha's callous dictatorship, Pjeter Arbnori, at 57, now found himself — after President and Prime Minister — the third most important person in the land.

By nominating him the Democratic Party had clearly aligned itself with those demanding that the victims of the worst of the suffering should be represented in the highest positions of power and influence.

It was also the most obvious signal — if one was still needed — that Stalinism Albanian-style had finally been consigned to the pages of history.

Arbnori had survived its worst moments. Tens of thousands of others were not so fortunate.

Born into a deeply committed Catholic family living in the Adriatic port of Durres, Pjeter's passionate fight against



Father Pjeter Arbnori chairing a session of the Albanian Parliament.

Communism began while he was still in his teens. His father Philip, first a fisherman and later an officer in the Albanian Gendarmerie, was killed fighting Hoxha's partisans in the bitter civil war. His mother, Justina, and two elder sisters, Antoinette and Margaret, vowed to continue the fight and defied all attempts to keep them away from the church.

The family now found themselves targeted as enemies of the State. With his sisters, Pjeter risked everything by assisting anti-Communist organizations to distribute leaflets in Shkoder. Just 14, he was already labelled 'dangerous' and, although he finished middle school with an excellent academic record and a medal, the authorities refused to award him a scholarship to continue his studies at high school or university.

Despite such barriers, Arbnori did succeed in obtaining a job as a teacher, but it was to prove short-lived. In February 1954 the Hoxha Government issued a secret decree to cleanse the educational system of all anti-Communist elements.

'I received an envelope. Inside there was the briefest of notes. "We advise you that all relations with this municipality have been cut off." In other words, I had been sacked with no right of appeal or hope of another job."

Arbnori steadfastly refused to give in. He discovered there was a tiny school high up in the mountains where every attempt to find a teacher had failed. Even though it involved a sixteen-hour walk, he volunteered. For six months he slept on the school floor.

After national service in the army, Arbnori returned to Durres to work as an agricultural labourer — ten hours a day, six days a week — in the fields of Xhafzotaj. By now his sister, Antoinette, had been condemned to ten years imprisonment for continuing to spread anti-Communist propaganda. For a whole month, Pjeter went without breakfast and, using the money he saved, bought some potatoes, onions, water melon and half a kilogram of meat. He put them into a sack and took them to Antoinette in Tirana gaol. 'It was 42 kilometres each way. I went by bike for there was nothing left for the train fare and I didn't want

to burden my aunt or my mother by asking them to help out.'

Such family loyalty, he found, ran contrary to everything the Communists were trying to propagate and the more he studied the Christian faith, the more Arbnori became convinced of its truths.

'For the Christian, the first commandment is to believe in God. The Albanian Communists believed in one man who was the dictator. Another of the Ten Commandments implores you to respect your parents. The Communists said you had to tell the Sigurimi all about the beliefs of your parents. Many turned their parents in and felt proud to have done so. In school they had read about Pavlic Morozov, a hero of the Soviet Union because he denounced his mother and father to the secret police. They were shot as enemies of Communism.

'Then there's the Commandment which says don't be a false witness. Yet the best way to please those Communists was to witness against someone. There were thousands of false witnesses in Albania, all because they wanted to keep on good terms with the Government.'

Using false documents, Arbnori managed to register for the Arts faculty at Tirana University. It was quite a *coup* considering that in the fifties you required two members of the Party of Labour to vouch for you and two references from your employer.

To prevent the very likely prospect of betrayal, he could not attend a single lecture. Studying at home through a correspondence course, he graduated within two and a half years, half the time allotted. To receive his degree he attended the graduation ceremony wearing an old leather jacket and disguised as a lorry driver.

Arbnori was appointed a teacher of literature in the former American School in the industrial city of Kavaja. He still continued his activities against the Communists, but less overtly. The textbooks the teachers had to use appalled him. The pupils, he says, were very clever. They could instantly understand their teachers' thinking by the manner in which the subject was presented. In Arbnori's case, they

rightly sensed a distinct lack of enthusiasm for the facts he was trying to get across. More than anything, his intonation and tongue-in-cheek approach achieved the desired effect. 'Albanian playwrights are all superior to Shakespeare,' he would say, prompting a spontaneous outbreak of laughter from his charges.

These were the heady days of Albania's association with the Soviet Union to whom the school-books attributed every scientific discovery. 'I would tell my pupils. George Stephenson was not the first man to make a steam engine that ran on rails. He pinched the idea from Pollsunov. The miner's safety lamp wasn't Davy's invention, it was developed by Jablotchov. Eddison was a thief too, as was Marconi . . . everyone knows Popov first discovered that radio waves could bend around the spherically-shaped earth. So Marconi's Nobel prize was a fake.'

Whenever some Russian hero was discredited, the textbooks had to be changed. 'There was no shame expressed on this . . . some books were rewritten not three times but seventeen times! And each new publication said that the previous one had lied. It wasn't a laughing matter either. for some people were arrested and spent years in gaol for not accepting it.'

Within a year of his appointment Arbnori was under arrest. In 1960 when Albania's relations with the Soviet Union were cut and many were hoping for political change. a group of intellectuals got together to form a Social Democratic organization based on the principles of Western countries and pluralism. Arbnori was the principal architect of the policy. Someone informed the Sigurimi, and seven of the protagonists were seized.

'I was brought before the court, tried and sentenced to death as a traitor and agent. In court they tried to force me to say that I was somebody's spy . . . . "It doesn't matter whose. Choose for yourself", they said to me. Of course I bluntly refused.

'In the event, they did not execute me. . . . Even executions ran to a certain plan and they had already carried out the required number that week.'

There was also a second reason. The authorities were convinced Arbnori was hiding a great deal of invaluable information. The investigation, under the most brutal torture, went on for another two years after the pronouncement of the death penalty.

Day and night he was kept in chains which were tightened the longer the questioning continued. For most of the time he was left in solitary confinement, but every now and then the door would open and a criminal would be pushed into the cell to spy on him and maintain a regular flow of information to the Sigurimi.

The psychological torture, Arbnori vividly recalls, was the most difficult to withstand. 'The investigators would play a taped cassette which contained the voices of members of your family. They pretended they had all been arrested and tortured. Listening to the screams, many prisoners broke down completely. Some committed suicide. Others gave up and told the Communists what they wanted to hear.

'Perhaps their plan was fulfilled. They hoped you could not cope with all those tortures and so use you as a spy for their own aims. That is why the title of my secret diary in gaol — "The fight to remain a man" — is so appropriate. All of us wanted to keep our dignity intact so we would never be ashamed of this period of our lives."

As suicides during investigation increased, the Sigurimi thought of more callous ways of preventing their prisoners from taking 'the easy option'. Most suicides had happened in the toilets which provided a few moments' respite from the endless brutality. Those who could take no more, smashed their skulls against the concrete wall. Many died that way, an agonizing but swift release. The Sigurimi put a stop to it by ramming steel helmets on the prisoners' heads.

'What food ever came was dreadful. The soup was water. For those on the point of death they brought a doctor, sent you to hospital for a week and then brought you straight back. Those who were denied food or had fasted for about twenty days, often died immediately they received a hospital meal. It was such a shock to the system. It simply could not adjust.'

Albanian poet and scholar, Arshi Pipa, who spent ten years in prison and labour camps, witnessed just such a death. A prisoner suffering from acute starvation was admitted to hospital and given a plate of spaghetti to eat. After taking only a couple of spoonfuls he dropped dead and was left lying on his bed for some time with wisps of spaghetti hanging over his chin.

To compound all the misery, Arbnori says people on the outside knew all sorts of false accusations were being made against their friends, yet they were still tempted to believe these stories because they desperately desired the downfall of Communism. So they helped spread rumours about plots being hatched because they were aware many people wanted to hear of such things.

'I met an 80-year-old man in prison who was a physical wreck. He'd declared he had walked to Janina to hand over information about a plot . . . but the poor old man could not even go to the wc.'

Having survived two years of interrogation, Arbnori was eventually incarcerated in the notorious gaol of Burrel for longer than any other man alive. What went on during those twenty-eight years is a testimony to the courage, conviction and sheer audacity of a quick-witted academic who refused to succumb to every attempt to break his spirit.

The greatest form of heroism in prison, he insists, is simply to have enough patience. That way you can teach others to survive.

Every winter, for at least a month, Arbnori was confined to a cell, dressed only in his underwear. Barefoot, he was forced to sit on a cement floor with the temperature minus 15 degrees Celsius. Buckets of water were thrown over the floor which froze almost at once. He was then tied into position using ropes suspended from hooks on the cell wall. The barred window was open to the elements and the door hatch was also left ajar to cause an icy current of air to encircle the trapped prisoner. The pain was excruciating. There were no blankets and the daily ration was just one piece of bread weighing half a kilo.

'I ate only half, placing the other half against my ribs

so I could use it as a prop to shield me from the ice-covered floor. That way I could turn on my side and try to get a few minutes sleep.'

Arbnori found to his surprise that those prisoners who arrived at Burrel in the best physical condition — big, strong and powerful — were often the first to break. Mentally, they simply could not cope. Others, their bodies ravaged by the instruments of torture, grew stronger in spirit as the torment dragged on into each successive year.

Many of the priests, he says, were living examples of Christianity in action. Men like Padre Meshkalla — well educated, a real philosopher and a good communicator — knew how to handle people. Spiritual strength, he had always maintained, came only through faith and a strong belief in God. The world may have abandoned them, but God not only knew of their suffering but was sharing it with them at every turn.

Often, those same priests were to be seen giving their meagre rations to others. Such examples of self-sacrifice made a deep and lasting impression.

Arbnori too, never lost his trust in God. No matter what new cruelties he was subjected to, he refused to abandon hope. 'I do not say that I demonstrated extraordinary bravery, but I was determined never to give in. I managed to preserve my optimism and good humour in every circumstance.'

Outside those times of solitary confinement, the prisoners' daily rations comprised 600 grams of bread (they were normally given just 500), 40 grams of pasta, 6 grams of vegetable oil and if they were fortunate, some frozen vegetables. There was no meat and no fish.

In addition they were allowed two kilos of food from their families once a month. This could include only fruit, sugar, margarine, biscuits and marmalade. At one stage, fish, eggs and pie had been permitted, but the authorities decided to ban them all.

After the order had been given, Arbnori and his six cellmates went on hunger strike. It lasted nineteen days and was supported by the other cells. The prison authorities became so alarmed that they first threatened the inmates and then increased their sentences by up to ten years.

In 1979 Arbnori was condemned for the third time. Seized from his cell, he was given a further ten years for writing a book in gaol that was not to the taste of the regime. It was an autobiographical work entitled *The House Half Constructed*. By then he had already smuggled two complete novels out of prison, risking his life in the process. Each had been written in code. If discovered by the police they would not have understood any of it.

Had Arbnori died in gaol, his wish was for his spirit to live on through his writings. He had come up with an ingenious method of getting them out of Burrel right under the noses of his prison guards.

His mother visited faithfully every month. After waiting, sometimes for hours, she was taken into a grim, concrete room just inside the prison walls. The door to the inner compound remained firmly locked. No visitor was ever allowed to see what lay beyond. The daily hell to which 640 men were subjected was kept a dark secret from all but the persecutors and their unfortunate victims.

In the middle of the room stood a small table. On the visitors' side a bench, on the other a wooden chair on which the prisoner was already seated. Standing abreast of the table the prison guard, who listened to every word and monitored every action. He was under precise instructions to ensure no physical contact took place between the prisoner and his visitor at any stage. 'My mother was ordered to put her bag of food on the table. The guard immediately checked each item inside and then ordered me to put my empty one alongside. A wink in my mother's direction was the only indication she needed. You see the empty bag she was handed had a double bottom and inside I had hundreds of small strips of paper torn from magazines on which I had superimposed my own script. Month by month the story was taking greater shape.'

Just in case his plot was ever discovered, Arbnori had cunningly woven an intricate pattern of deceptions into his writings designed to throw the authorities into total confusion. One of his favourite ploys was to hide behind the name of an internationally known novelist and pretend he was translating an original work into Albanian. John Creasey, one of England's most prolific writers, fitted the bill perfectly. Creasey had published so many novels that Arbnori thought it highly unlikely his captors would bother to check the hundreds of titles available.

He was right. So from his prison cell, *Brighton, A Summer's Lightning'* was conceived. It was, of course, entirely Arbnori's own work, but under the title he penned the words 'by Xhon Krizi' and 'perkthyer nga Anglishtja' (translated from English).

The protagonist is an Irishman living in Brighton. He longs for a new life. The *real* character is Pjeter Arbnori as a young man in Durres, fighting for his freedom.

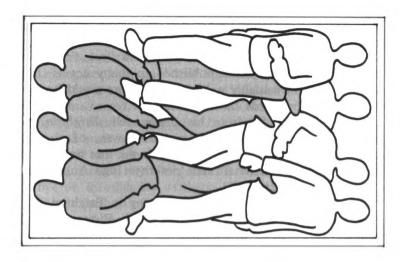
His prison diaries may take years to decipher. The entries are all hidden in notebooks between lines of jokes, legends, idioms and Albanian phraseology. 'I always tried to fill up my time. If I severed myself from time and life, I knew I would be lost. A weekly letter from my sister did more than anything to keep me alive — news from the outside world, accounts of family happenings.'

Yet always the pressures were intense. Raising your voice to a guard was punishable by a three-month ban from writing a letter. Being caught singing or whistling meant one month's solitary confinement, all part of the objective totally to depersonalize human beings.

Every now and then the guards would burst into a cell and begin drawing pencil marks across the floor. They wanted to make life even more unbearable and did so by designing precise areas in which each man must sit. The most fortunate was offered 66 centimetres, the unluckiest 38 centimetres.

'When we quarrelled among ourselves the guards would simply open the door and throw in an additional prisoner. That meant we had to sleep virtually on top of one another.'

In 1989, after twenty-eight years and six months of the most horrendous brutality, Arbnori was finally released.



The collapse of Europe's last Marxist-Leninist government was now imminent and in a desperate bid to hold back a growing tide of unrest, Hoxha's successor, Ramiz Alia, was slowly looking toward reforms.

'When I got out I went to see an old classmate in Shkoder, who was First Secretary of the Communist Party there. All I wanted was a job, but he refused to receive me. Although I had translated lots of books in prison from English, French, Italian and Russian, I was sent to work — unpaid — as an apprentice carpenter at the age of 55!'

Still, Arbnori's suffering was far from over. Having joined the new Democratic Party prior to the 1991 election, he was the target of an assassination attempt in Shkoder where protesters were complaining of voting irregularities there. He escaped, but four people, including the 24-year-old leader of the Shkoder Democrats, Arben Brozi, were killed by shots fired from within the Communist Party head-quarters.

Arbnori was determined to make up for lost time. He married a friend of the family in the reopened Catholic church in Shkoder. Susanna was just 35, slim, attractive

and full of life. They desperately wanted to start a family. Yet the terror continued. This time Communist supporters threw two fire-bombs into the Arbnori home and Susanna, hoping to present her husband with the most precious of gifts, aborted.

With the Democratic Party's sweeping election victory in 1992, Arbnori's life changed completely. The new Albanian President, Sali Berisha, was determined that the injustices perpetrated on so many political prisoners must be addressed. As a first move, Pjeter Arbnori was asked to take over the key post of parliamentary Speaker. 'It was a great honour. I thought at first maybe the job should have gone to a younger man, but I am proud to be representing those who had to bear so much of the suffering.'

Now the horrors of Burrel have been exchanged for an elegantly furnished office, and the most sought-after seat in Parliament from where Arbnori directs proceedings and calls the deputies to order with an assurance more closely associated with the most seasoned politician. Susanna is expecting again.

Amazingly, there are no thoughts of revenge.

'Every day I see people who spied on me, who accused me, who interrogated and tortured me, judges who brought false evidence and witnesses to testify against me, and I turn my head on the other side so as not to show contempt.

'I don't say I forgive or forget them, but the Albanians have a greater aim which is establishing democracy in the country and re-unity with Europe. That is where we must invest our energies and this will minimize the suffering I have passed through — turning the head towards the future.'

At that, we parted . . . well, not quite. For as I made for the door, there were to be two final reminders of Pjeter Arbnori's lively sense of humour which seemed to run so contrary to a life of intolerable suffering.

'A political prisoner travelled a hundred miles to come and see me in Parliament the other day . . . but the soldiers on the door refused to let him through.

"Oh, I see you've still got Pieter Arbnori under armed





Pjeter Arbnori.

guard!" came the retort. "I'll just have to read his books instead."

Alas, there's a problem with that one too. Raw materials are so scarce there isn't enough paper to get his novels into print. Pjeter Arbnori is nothing if not patient.

## THE RUSH FOR FREEDOM

Dritan Dejti was settling down to his homework when there was a loud knock at the door. His father, Hassan, was first to his feet wondering just who the unexpected guest might be.

Uninvited into the hallway entered the visitor everyone dreaded. The Dejti household had just opened its door to a member of the hated Sigurimi. There were no formal introductions. The secret police never wasted time when there was a straightforward job to be done.

Was Mr. Dejti aware that his teenage son had committed a serious criminal act which would incur a heavy penalty?

Overhearing the heated conversation, Dritan downed books and hurried into the sitting room.

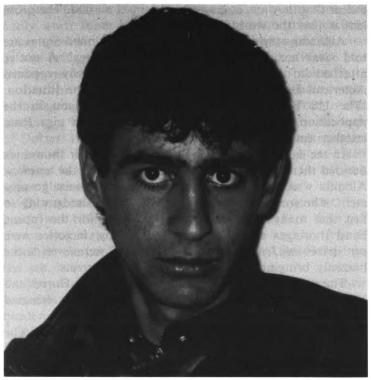
'What's the problem?' he enquired politely.

'You know perfectly well what the problem is. Your TV aerial is pointing in the wrong direction. You've been watching Italian television,' barked the Sigurimi officer.

Mr. Dejti, fearing the consequences of his son's action, protested vehemently, endeavouring to shift the blame on to himself. It was all to no avail. 'We know you are just a cook. You wouldn't know how to adjust an aerial. No. We have information that your son is responsible. I hope you realize what this will cost him.'

Mr. Dejti knew only too well. Everyone in Tirana was aware of the penalty handed down for such conceived acts of treachery.

At 15, Dritan's future was closed, his name written on



No escape . . . Dritan Dejti sent back by the Italians.

the Sigurimi blacklist. At school, the teacher paraded him before the entire class. 'This is a thoroughly evil boy. He has shamed his school, his family and his country!' For daring to take a few minutes' glance at Western life — albeit through a fuzzy black and white television picture — the punishment was a ban on all further education. No high school, no university.

The penalty was imposed in 1987. Five years later Dritan was still looking for his first job. Given the horrendous level of unemployment in the country, the prospects for a young man without any academic qualifications are extremely slim. Little wonder that thousands of young people have vowed to get out of Albania at all costs. The coming of democracy

means that they are, at least, free to travel abroad. The problem is that the world does not want them.

Albanians trying to visit Britain or the United States are told visas are only issued in 'a third country'. A notice attached to the spiked railings of the newly-reopened American Embassy spells out the reality of the situation. 'The US Embassy in Tirana cannot assist you in the application, nor will we assist in obtaining a visa from another embassy in Tirana.'

In the early spring of 1991 Albanians in their thousands decided there was no other answer but to flee the country. Albania was in its last throes of Marxist-Leninist government. The social and economic fabric was disintegrating so fast that many were abandoning all hope for the future. Food shortages were worsening by the day, factories were on strike and, noticeably, the students were even more brazenly bringing their protests on to the streets.

The rush to the ports became unstoppable. In Durres and Vlora, ships large and small were overrun by frenzied refugees demanding to put to sea at once.

In all, 20,000 escaped to the Italian port of Brindisi. The vast majority — after much vacillating by the Italian Government — were allowed to stay. They were subsequently dispersed across mainland Italy and Sicily. Others travelled on to Germany and Belgium and many found employment.

The sheer size of the exodus though, was to serve as a warning not just to Italy, but to the European Community as a whole, that the immigration pressure from the former Communist States of the East was rising relentlessly and might very easily explode.

The next Albanian invaders in search of la dolce vita would not be so fortunate.

Wednesday 7 August 1991 was a particularly hot and stifling day in Tirana. Even with the window open, getting a good night's sleep had proved something of an impossibility.

Dritan Dejti rose early, looked up at the cloudless sky and wondered how he would while away the hours of another meaningless day in a city which held out no

prospects for him. It had been frustration at every turn, his badly worn shoes an unhappy reminder of those endless hours spent trudging the streets in search of a job. By now he was feeling a burden to his parents. Self confidence was eroding and there was very little he could do about it.

Lest his spirits sink too low, Dritan decided to take advantage of the warm weather by joining some friends and hitching a lift to the glorious stretch of beach just south of Durres. It was here that Albania's Stalinist masters used to reward their most diligent workers with State-aided holidays in villas overlooking the white sands in an area where the sea is shallow and safe for bathing.

By mid-morning the temperature had begun to soar. The beach was filling fast, everyone eager to make a dash for the cooling waters of the Adriatic. Dritan and his friends left their clothes in a neat pile and plunged headlong into the sea.

They had swum less than 50 yards offshore when their attention was drawn to another stretch of the coastline bordering Durres harbour. From a mile off, it resembled an anthill with distant images of people scurrying back and forth in a wave of confusion and excitement.

Eager to know what all the commotion was about, the swimmers turned and headed for the shore. They had barely picked themselves out of the water when a dozen or so breathless teenagers came pounding across the sands, the spring in their step suggesting they were out for more than the customary morning jog.

'What the \_\_\_\_ is going on around here?' Dritan shrieked.

'Follow us . . . you'll soon see,' came the reply. 'If you want to get out of this \_\_\_\_ place then this may be your only chance!'

Dritan and his friends knew precisely what this meant. There was to be another exodus to Italy and there was not a minute to lose. In the rush to join the stampede, they forgot all about their clothes; a small sacrifice in the bid for freedom.

At the entrance to the docks, scuffles broke out with the

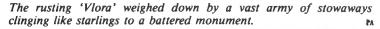
Albanian police. The sheer weight of numbers meant that without substantial reinforcements, the security forces were powerless to prevent an escape *en masse*. The army was radioed for help, but many of the first soldiers to arrive made a frantic dash for the boats too, determined not to miss their opportunity to get away.

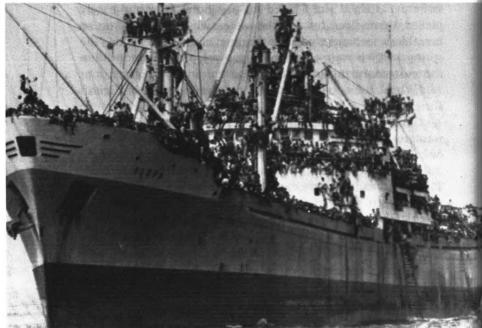
It was a bizarre scene . . . the police firing warning shots in a bid to restore order, the soldiers firing their guns in celebration of an impending rush for freedom.

By 11am Dritan had grabbed a cable and swung himself on board the *Vlora*, one of the rusting freighters of the Albanian merchant fleet which was already lurching under the weight of a vast army of stowaways hanging precariously from the masts and packed like sardines into the holds.

Still they kept coming; youngsters, students, entire families of eight or more. In the blind panic to scramble aboard, some fell into the murky water. Others lost hold of the ropes. At least two drowned. Many were pulled from the water by a multitude of outstretched hands.

By the time the Vlora set sail there were 10,000 people





fighting for space, food and water. The 9,000-tonne freighter had incurred damage on her last voyage and was badly in need of repair. The captain feared a disaster of titanic proportions.

The ship's engines would not start. But there were sufficient farm mechanics among the refugees to overcome this first emergency. At 6pm the *Vlora* finally slipped her moorings and inched her way out into the open sea. The holds had been filled with sugar. In their desperation for food, the Albanians took what they could, but in such hot, sticky conditions it only served to increase the problem of dehydration. In this claustrophobic nightmare tempers became frayed, babies screamed for something to eat and people fought each other like wild animals to get their hands on whatever they could find.

Dritan found himself next to a young couple who had a boy aged 4 and a 7-month-old baby. 'They had a quarter of a loaf of bread and one piece of water melon between them and nothing for the baby. The father cut the water melon, gave the inside to his wife, and allowed me and the other boys to eat the skin.'

In the middle of the night all hell broke loose. Gangs from local towns had managed to pinpoint the whereabouts of rival groups and pitched battles began over the heads of mothers and children. By dawn it was clear the ship would not be allowed to enter Brindisi and it turned northwards towards Bari. Half a dozen other limping vessels were also besieging the southern Adriatic coast.

As helicopters circled overhead, the *Vlora* broke through a blockade of coastal patrol boats and police launches and made for the entrance to Bari harbour. The captain radioed to harbour officials that he had pregnant women and scores of sick people on board. 'The matter is out of control,' he insisted. 'I am not in a position to decide. I am under pressure. No one is in charge here.'

One observer standing on the end of the jetty compared the human cargo to starlings packed on to a battered monument. Some were still clinging to the masts they had climbed more than twelve hours before, waving frantically

despite Italian warnings that they would be repatriated.

Under the strain, a derrick on the upper deck snapped and crushed an elderly man standing just a few feet from Dritan. 'It was frightening. He was killed instantly but no one made any attempt to recover his body.' When police later boarded the Vlora they found another man dead, lying in a pool of blood, a victim of the gang fights.

If the intention of the Italian authorities had been to prevent the Albanians from getting ashore then the mission was doomed to failure. Having braved the wrath of their government and a risky sea passage to get within a few yards of the West, nothing was going to hold the refugees back. Fearful of not being allowed to put feet on solid ground, they panicked. Many jumped naked into the dock. Soon the harbour was filled with bare bodies swarming about between the sea and the jetty, many of them in a state of physical and spiritual desperation.

Dritan looked down on the lines of carabinieri hundreds of them carrying their riot shields, their faces masked because of the fear of an epidemic. 'I don't say I was naïve. None of us expected to walk straight into paradise, but this was intimidation on a scale we had never imagined.'

The Italians allowed everyone to disembark — many had swum ashore anyway — but warned yet again that all would be sent back. The country was still trying to come to terms with the 20,000 Albanians who had arrived in March. The Government had set a 31 July deadline for their expulsion if they had not been granted asylum or found work, but the deadline passed and nothing was done. Hopes of freedom were still high as Dritan moved towards the gangway, by now lurching violently under the strain and threatening every few seconds to capsize, hurling a heaving mass of human flesh into the oily waters beneath.

Those who could keep their balance walked straight into the waiting arms of the police. Each person was frisked in turn and then put on to a bus for the short trip to Bari's Della Vittoria football stadium. Unlike its replacement, one of the showpieces for the 1990 World Cup, this huge bowl was to serve as the setting for a spectacle of human misery that shamed the Italian authorities, humiliated and brutalized the refugees and passed on a salutary lesson to the governments of Western Europe that other more humane and co-ordinated policies would have to be devised to deal with the problem of emigration on such a massive scale.

Dritan and pals were among the first to reach the stadium. They noticed the groundsman had left the hosepipe, used to water the pitch, turned on. 'It was hot, stifling even in the open air, and we hadn't had a drink since we left Albania. It tasted better than champagne. It was our one stroke of good fortune, for as more refugees began to filter into the ground, the police turned off the water and sealed the tap.'

The carabinieri then surrounded the stadium. Parents were beginning to become hysterical, for as yet there was still no food for their children.

'First, we have order. Then we feed you,' the police announced.

Darkness was already beginning to fall. Terrified that the Italians might be attempting to starve them out, thousands began to run riot. Youths on the upper terraces rained bricks and stones on to police reinforcements outside. Young mothers became embroiled too, hitting the police with plastic bottles and pleading for water.

As the situation worsened, hundreds of refugees made a rush for the gates. Their combined strength forced open the steel doors. Dritan watched horrified as two girls were trampled underfoot in the stampede. He never found out if they survived, for now with his brother, Sokol, he was through the gates and running as hard as he could to try to escape the clutches of the police.

It was a forlorn hope. The pair were all too visible. After all, they were still in their swimming trunks!

'The carabinieri soon caught up with us. For resisting arrest, we were beaten and then driven back into the stadium. Someone felt sorry for us and gave some plastic bags so we could cover ourselves till morning.'

Helicopters with searchlights buzzed the stadium during

the night. Efforts to feed the refugees had been suspended after the riot. By morning the Albanians were a picture of human dejection, misery, and shattered illusions. Life was to become even more difficult. Fearing for the safety of the police on the ground, the Italians finally distributed some food in a manner that was not only degrading but which they must have realized guaranteed that the weakest — and especially the children — would be left to starve.

The helicopters were back, hovering over the stadium. Food packets were hurled from the air to the wretched mass below. 'They treated us like wild animals in a zoo . . . bottles of water were dropped on top of us too . . . but the gangsters just gathered up the bread and water. The women and children still got nothing.'

Faced with privation of such horrendous proportions, there was another concerted push towards the gates. It would be preferable, many thought, to suffer police beatings outside than to die in a stadium without food and where families were now encamped among mounds of excreta with flies swarming across the filth and debris.

Those who squeezed through the doors ran straight into a row of water tankers — an unexpected chance for a drink and a wash. On the second day Dritan again found himself being baton-charged back into the football ground. 'Events were running totally out of control. The refugees picked up stones and bricks, anything they could lay their hands on, to throw at the police. A real battle ensued. We were just like an army. We got hold of the *carabinieri's* helmets, their masks and their sticks. I beat one policeman over the head with a can I'd filled with water because he had hit my brother.'

Lest they lose control, the police opened fire above the heads of the enraged and terrified protesters. Three people were brought from the stadium with gunshot wounds. Police claimed two of them had been shot by other Albanians in the fight for bread. Ten policemen were also taken to hospital with head injuries. One of them told the casualty department, 'We had to fire. They were going to kill us. You didn't see the look on their faces.'

On the second night the pavements outside the stadium provided the only opportunity for a few minutes' sleep. Those left inside faced one of two options. Rough handling by the authorities or being robbed of their few ragged possessions by the Albanian gangs.

Next day the people of Bari decided it was time to show the kind of compassion that had been so generously demonstrated by the citizens of Brindisi a few months before. They left the comfort of their villas clutching plastic bags filled with bread, coffee, margarine, fruit and tinned meat.

By then, though, many of the refugees had given up their dream of a new life in the West. Bedraggled, exhausted and humiliated, they accepted defeat. Privately, embarrassed government officials admitted that their intention was to make life as difficult as possible so that Albanians would eventually be happy to go back home, tactics condemned by several Italian newspapers as deceitful, barbaric and uncivilized.

Some returned the way they came, by boat. Others were flown in Italian Airforce C-130 Hercules transports which ran a shuttle service on the short hop across the Adriatic. Dritan was among them. Arriving home at Rinas Airport, he was interrogated by the Albanian police.

""Where are your clothes?" they asked, obviously amused to see us returning in bathing trunks.

"'Come off it," I said, "if you really want to help, let's have your trousers!" At that, someone behind me whom I'd never seen before, thrust a paper bag into my hands. Inside there was a bundle of old clothes. I wondered if he'd found them lying on Durres beach!"

Back in Bari, a hard core of 2,000 Albanians refused to budge, claiming they were prepared to fight Italy's special anti-riot troops to the death if necessary. Plans were first drawn up to storm the stadium. Then the prospect of a brutal showdown was called off and the remaining refugees told they would be allowed to stay after all.

They were driven to hostels in different parts of the country, fed and washed, and then interviewed by immi-

gration officials. All were beginning to believe they had scored a notable victory. There were promises of being taken on to Rome or Milan. It was only when they boarded the aircraft that they realized they had been duped. Within an hour of taking off they were back to earth with an almighty bump — in Tirana. They had been handed two sandwiches each. Uneaten ones were confiscated on arrival.

Four hundred Albanian army deserters faced a similar fate only days after being told they would be given refugee status. The soldiers said they had understood they were being taken for a medical check-up. Instead they were flown home to face charges of desertion.

In the chaos of the 1991 exodus, dozens of children became separated from their parents. Some were taken to orphanages or given to Italian foster parents while the long and complicated job began of trying to trace their families. Other children — some as young as 8 — had ran away from home without as much as saying goodbye to mum and dad. In temporary care in Brindisi, they looked remarkably relaxed about the whole adventure.

Despite the Italians' firm line, a few refugees inevitably managed to escape the net. Two of them, Hoxha Shkelyim and Zenon Hassan, spent eight hours hanging on to cables beneath the Milan-Brussels overnight express. Able to rest only during stops, they hooked their arms and legs on to the cables, risking death at any moment during a journey of more than 500 miles. As the train sped along at over 80 miles an hour they were hanging only inches above the track. The two were finally discovered at Arlon station in Belgium where a low platform gave them away. They had neither visas nor documentation, and were wearing only T-shirts and shorts. Belgium's law on asylum may have given them a strong chance of finding a new home. Deportation orders there are not always stringently enforced.

In Tirana, rumours persisted that the refugees had been covertly encouraged by the Albanian government so that young people could see life in the West was not the panacea they believed it to be and to force the European Community to recognize the gravity of the country's food crisis. It is difficult to substantiate either theory, but it most certainly helped to concentrate minds in Rome and Brussels on Albania's desperate plight.

Within weeks, over one thousand unarmed Italian soldiers, together with helicopters and hundreds of army trucks, had set up headquarters in Durres. Operation Pelican—codenamed after the bird that holds more in its beak than its belly—had begun. The first stage was to distribute 100 million dollars worth of food from the Italian Government.

The hand that had so firmly reversed the Albanian exodus was now the principal player in the battle to keep thousands of starving Albanians alive. In this land of untold suffering, winter was fast approaching.

### ALBANIAN HUMOUR. . . .

One day two Albanians met and discussed what to do with the day. A few hours later they decided to go fishing and went to the river. After an hour's further discussion they decided where to sit.

They were lucky. One man caught two fish and the other three. The man with three fish felt extremely pleased with his skills and good fortune, and proudly took the fish to his wife. 'Look,' he said, 'now we shall eat well because I have three fish.' His wife became angry and said, 'What good are three fish to us? We have no wood to cook with, no oil to cook with, and not even a pan to cook in! If we eat raw fish we shall become ill, if we become ill we shall go to hospital, if we go to hospital we shall die! Throw them away!'

Sadly, the man went back to the river and threw the fish in. Moments later the fish reappeared and shouted, 'LONG LIVE THE PARTY OF LABOUR!'



# OPENING THE DOOR

We knew it existed, though all in authority tried to persuade us otherwise. Somewhere in that most volatile of places — the northern city of Shkoder — our job was to unearth what a confidant described to us as a 'real shocker'.

He was referring to the Hospital for Mentally Handicapped Children, a hospital in name only, for it barely provided shelter never mind anything remotely resembling psychiatric care.

Town Hall officials, the police, street traders, passers-by . . . we asked them all. They said they had never heard of the place. Thankfully, the local branch of the Red Cross knew better and sent us in the right direction.

The hospital — a stark ugly-looking building — lay just 500 yards from one of the city's main thoroughfares. It might just as well have been 500 miles. No one visited and no one cared.

As our vehicle sped through the entrance gate, a cloud of dust swirled around the filthy forecourt that provided the children with their only experience of the world outside. A handful of them, clad in striped pyjamas shabby and holed, ran down the stairs, staring in disbelief at the mere sight of a visitor. Others on the upper floor, their necks craned through the distorted iron bars, looked every bit as bemused. One boy, a little older and taller than the others, beckoned us to step inside. Even with such an eerie welcome, we were still totally unprepared for what lay on the other side of the door.

Children, some as young as 3, were huddled together on cold stone floors in what the matron called the sitting room. But there were no seats, no toys, no books, no comforts, not even a lick of paint on the walls.

After eighteen years the matron's dreadful secret was out. Lili Boshnjaku's eyes welled with tears, her agonized face lowered almost as though she was afraid to be seen. 'For God's sake tell the British people what you have seen here. Even Albanian children don't deserve to live like this.'

Two poetic sketches penned by David Grubb, Executive Director of the charity, Feed the Children, after watching the author's graphic BBC Television News report from The Hospital for Mentally Handicapped Children in Shkoder.

#### THE HOME

The flies are always ready to play, darting between darkness and silence and the stench of scars.

The children hunch in remote coils of desolation; they perch between stranded ideas, dream junk, no longer remembering what anything is meant to be.

There are no toys, no games, no names; there is no colour. Tides of torture relentlessly lap on crooked dreams.

One boy stretches into space, recoils, springs out again, as if there were somewhere to fly.

In the same cold cage, two others squat, frozen in despair, too tired even to rock, to continue pecking at their chains.

#### THE ROOM

This is the sitting room. This is the room where we sit all day. This is the floor.
These are the walls. This is the window where there is no glass. This is the ceiling.
This is the useless radiator. This is the place where the light bulb hung. This is the door. It shuts. It is closed. There is nothing either side. This is the sitting room.
The sitting down in silence room. The nothing room.
The all life room. The room where we are.
The room where we will remain.
This is the entire world. This is the total existence.
This is the no room. The don't room. The cannot room.
The never ever room. The will never room.
This is the sitting room.

The forgotten children in the Hospital for Mentally Handicapped Children, Shkoder.



If Hoxha's brutal regime had deemed such children should be locked out of sight and out of mind, then here was living proof of the extent of the cruelty to which he was prepared to subject the most vulnerable of his subjects. Yet five months after free elections and the coming of democracy, nothing had changed. There was no hot water, no soap, no towels. Changes of 'clothing' - for the most part rags — were so infrequent that the children were often forced to sit for hours covered in their own excrement.

In the dark, forbidding corridors — the nearest thing they had to a playground — naked and ghostly figures. their hair cropped back to keep the lice away, were running aimlessly back and forth. Most, though, appeared to have little inclination for exercise. All they wanted to do was sit, sometimes up to a dozen crantmed into a room resembling a prison cell. Many had been abandoned by their parents. There were various degrees of handicap. Some were totally illiterate, others badly brain-damaged. In a corner one older boy was banging his head continuously against the wall.

I counted about seventy children in the hospital. There were those who simply refused to move, staring into space and unable to comprehend anything going on around them. The lucky ones had claimed a few inches on a threadbare blanket on the floor. It provided the only warmth.

Some members of staff tried to offer love and affection. They seemed frustrated at every turn, with no resources to call on. The majority seemed uninterested in the children's needs. They stood in a corner, smoking and sullenfaced. It was hard to take in. Most, I presumed, were mothers with children of their own. Yet here attitudes were hard and cold. They did not play with their charges. There were no hugs and no attempt to stimulate the children.

Hygiene was non-existent. Some of the children had open wounds, but there were no ointments or bandages. Some had serious infections, but there were no medicines. Others in a dank and dirty dormitory further down the corridor were lying in horribly rusted cots which looked likely to fall apart at any moment. They were so weak that

they found it impossible to summon enough energy to wipe away the flies.

The showers were inoperative. Using the alternative was a traumatic experience. I could barely watch as Silvana, just 3 years old, was subjected to the 'bucket treatment'. This involved having a pail of freezing water poured over her head from a few feet away. The rush of water engulfed her tiny fragile frame, her piercing screams ample and painful testimony of the agonies of taking even a wash. Without hot water or a bar of soap, the whole wretched exercise did little more than remove the dust from her hair. Silvana was also covered in rashes and sores, hardly surprising with the nurse compensating for the lack of a towel by rubbing the water away with her bare and roughened hands.

The aid agency, Feed The Children, had managed to reach the city with some humanitarian aid, but with several other hospitals to supply, there was not enough to last more than a couple of days. In any case, the refrigerator had ceased to function eighteen years ago. Ever since, it had been used as a rag cupboard.

The sight of a new ladle to stir the bean broth, sent round from the General Hospital nearby, was enough to raise flagging spirits. The last wooden one had been thrown into the kitchen stove when the logs ran out.

Nobody was looking forward to winter. Apart from the twisted bars, there were only a few scraps of hardboard on the windows. The rain poured in whenever the frequent storms blew in across the mountains.

Everywhere, the stench was terrible. Like everything else in this dreadful place the toilets did not work. Faeces littered the stone floors. The matron and the more willing nurses had to double as cleaners.

We pushed open the door of another room. Four infants were lying in filthy cots, with just a thin blanket to keep out the cold. Lili Boshnjaku came scuttling down the corridor behind me. She paused for a few moments, leant over the cot and lifted little Albert.

'Look, he's paralysed . . . for the sake of God, you must help these children. They have nothing and are

entirely dependent on us, but without assistance from the outside world, what can we do? Promise that you will do something.' If I hadn't realized at that point the full horrors of the legacy of the Hoxha's years then, our BBC camera had certainly recorded one of the most odious chapters.

The Albanian capital, Tirana, lies 70 miles to the south. In the country's largest maternity hospital, they simply cannot keep up with the fastest birth rate in Europe. In 1980 there were 2 million mouths to feed. By 1992 that figure had soared to 3.2 million and is still rising. With so many births there are not enough cots. Two, sometimes three, newly-born babies are crammed into one cot. Even worse. we found three babies placed in the one functioning incubator. 'If you think we have problems,' I was told, 'then take a look at the situation in Elbasan.' I did. In the maternity unit there, I counted six babies in one incubator. Three of them had developed hepatitis, the risk of cross infection was unthinkable.

Incredibly, most of the maternity hospitals were without milk. Mothers unable to feed their babies were taking them to suck on others' breasts. There were no bottles, no teats, no comforts.

Wherever we travelled the situation was equally depressing. In children's homes and hospitals across Albania, hepatitis, malnutrition and respiratory problems are still widespread. In Tirana's Paediatric Hospital, doctor Xhilda Raco said she was unable to sleep because of worries that the next day would bring more heartbreaking decisions. With only one respirator at her disposal, she frequently had to decide which child would continue to live and which would die. 'We want to do so much, but we have nothing to work with. Parents are so worried about infections that many refuse to send their children to hospital, even when they are seriously ill.'

In the wards, needles, syringes and drip feeds were being used time and again, with hairgrips used to regulate the flow. Most of this equipment had come from China and was crudely made.



In another part of the city, a young father was sitting by the roadside clutching his little daughter. Her face was covered in festering sores, her soft and repetitive moans unnoticed by passers-by. It was the nearest point the father could find to the front of the dystrophy hospital. He would have a long wait, for inside, the wards were vastly overcrowded.

Albania is the only country in Europe with a network of these supposedly specialist hospitals to look after the desperate needs of badly malnourished children. Yet is was hard to find a specialist. Even harder to find an aspirin or any form of antibiotic, never mind proper food for the babies.

Children aged 6 months weighed only 10 pounds. Babies were again doubled up in most of the wooden cots which seemed in imminent danger of collapse. The only heat was provided by a brick laid on the floor. It had a single electrical element sunk into a central cavity in the baked clay. Bare wires dangled over two of the cots where babies were engaged in a desperate fight for life. The sheets in the room were grey with age.

As if all this was not bad enough, night after night the hospital was being plunged into total darkness. Without heat or light, there was little the medical staff could do to comfort suffering children. There were no emergency generators, not even a candle. Despairing nurses were forced to set fire to pieces of newspaper so they could patrol the wards and monitor their patients' progress.

For many babies, survival in such appalling conditions was simply impossible. Some had dystrophia. Others hepatitis or gastroenteritis or bronchial pneumonia; a considerable number were suffering from all four.

As the lights finally came on again, nurses were showing particular concern for a little boy of just 7 months. Artan was gently lifted from his cot, wrapped in a blanket and hurried down three flights of stairs. The wait for an ambulance seemed interminable. By the time he reached the Paediatric Hospital, Artan had succumbed to the onset of pneumonia. There was nothing more anyone could do to

save him. One more innocent victim in a country struggling against insuperable odds.

By the spring of 1992 the infant mortality rate had soared to more than five times the average for the rest of Europe. Forty per cent of Albanian children were suffering from malnutrition. Ten per cent of those cases, the World Health Organization says, were moderate to severe. The further from Tirana, the worse the situation becomes. A survey of 10,500 infants aged up to 3 years showed 11 per cent were malnourished in the capital, against 33 per cent in the surrounding area and over 50 per cent in the mountain districts of the north.

With so many village communities cut off for much of the winter, parents are unable to get their sick children to hospital. Those who do, often leave it much too late.

The average stay in a dystrophic hospital is five months, but many babies end up institutionalized, leaving them with developmental problems. Admission to hospital also means their breast-feeding is halted, depriving them of interaction and bonding with their mothers as well as antibodies and calories.

Overworked, grossly underpaid and without the equipment with which to do their job, doctors have started to leave Albania in droves. Over a hundred were reported to have gone to France in a six-month period. A fleeting glance at the country's main pharmaceutical factory provides one powerful explanation for the size of the exodus. The former Communist Government had described it as a 'modern laboratory in which a great number of higher cadres and specialists work'.

The evidence provides a far more chilling picture. The Chinese-made machines are so antiquated that medicaments and pills spill out over the filthy floors which are covered in thousands of tiny fragments of broken glass. Female employees are paid a pittance for hand filling 14,000 phials with nothing more than distilled water before passing them to colleagues to seal using a bunsen burner. On average it takes most of the raw materials required for



Tablets being manufactured on antiquated Chinese machinery in Albania's Pharmaceutical factory.

this place one month to reach the Adriatic port of Durres from the People's Republic of China.

All of this, of course, was most distressing to record. Nothing more so than to look straight into the swollen eyes of an emaciated baby whose daily agonies are being increased by each new infection to sweep the ward — and realizing that there is no proper medication to deal with it.

Yet, if it's the images of suffering children which rightly evoke the public conscience, then the misery forced on large

sections of Albania's adult population must not be allowed to be forgotten.

Across the mountains the city of Elbasan hides one of the grimmest legacies of the Hoxha years. On a hillside right at the outer extremities of the town, a mustard-coloured building comes into view. It looks to all intents like an old factory block which has fallen into disrepair.

A closer inspection however, reveals a very different story. For this is Elbasan Psychiatric Hospital, the largest in all of Albania. Few who enter here as patients ever come out.

Vjollca Dedej, our interpreter with a highly commendable knack for making light of the most difficult situations, approached the security guard in his ramshackle cabin by the large iron gates through which only a tiny handful have ever managed to escape.

'There is a party here from the BBC who would like to film inside. Would you please inform the Director. I have to tell you they will not take "No" for an answer.'

The guard had never entertained a request like this before. His jaw dropped abruptly. He could not leave his post. The gates, we observed, were ever so slightly ajar. While Vjollca continued to divert the guard's attention, we slid through the railings unnoticed.

Within seconds we had negotiated the front steps and moved stealthily into the entrance hall. It was like walking straight into a blackened railway tunnel . . . filthy, freezing and funereal. Existence in this forbidding place must surely rank as one of the nearest things to hell on earth.

In the previous month no fewer than twenty-five patients had perished inside the hospital walls. By the time winter was out, the staff were predicting that one out of every six patients who remained would also be dead. Pneumonia again was the principal killer.

One old woman, bent double with the cold, criss-crossed the stone floor endlessly, tugging at her tattered coat and then every few steps, furiously rubbing her hands to boost her circulation. The coughing went on incessantly.

This was an institution without any creature comforts;

no heat, no light, no drugs and no hope. Some had spent a lifetime here, pronounced insane for daring to mutter the mildest word against Enver Hoxha. They shared the same spartan existence with those suffering from acute mental illness.

Many told us they never left their beds. Few even had the benefit of a mattress and were forced to sleep on broken bed springs whose jagged edges lacerated exposed limbs. Pleas for help from staff and patients alike went unheeded.

The state of the kitchen was beyond belief. There was one stove to cook for 500, a broken refrigerator and a food store which, barring the odd stale loaf, was empty.

The one hot meal of the day was always the same: a bowl of watery soup, and a few strips of macaroni. It was accepted gratefully, for it provided the only inner warmth of the day.

It was, however, only a temporary respite, for by now the wind was tearing through the barred windows and there was no one to replace the glass a demented patient had broken yet again.

Bathing was a degrading business. Thirty women queued, naked, for a 'bath', which meant sitting in a trough and, just as in the Shkoder institution, having cold water poured over them.

There were no incontinence aids. When beds were wet, the stuffing was removed and washed and then put back again.

The winter temperature *inside* the hospital had dropped to minus 7 degrees Celsius. There were radiators, but the heating never came on. The desperate continued to cling on to the pipes but all to no avail. The patients felt abandoned, the doctors helpless and angry that they were unable to provide even a few minutes' warmth.

In one wing a few sodden logs were left over from attempts to light a fire. The patients hurried from their beds to jostle for position. They included a boy of 14. All stood silently until the last embers died away.

Outside, another group — the men dressed in donkey jackets and pyjamas, the women in shroud-like shifts with

no underwear — crowded into a bunker and made their own fire from whatever sticks they could find among the rubbish strewn across the yard.

A deranged patient tried to fill a pail of water from a makeshift well. She pulled and pulled at the hand pump, but the water was completely frozen.

The shackles of Communism may have been broken, but for these wretched people the untold suffering goes on. There are no plans to shut the hospital down or remove the patients to another institution where they can be properly cared for.

The director ushered me into his office. 'I hope you can help us. Too many patients are dying here and there's nothing any of us can do to stop it. Look, I have just one telephone, but it never works. No one comes to repair it. I am frightened and sick with worry about what will happen next.'

Still shaking with emotion, Dr. Gazmir Zhuzhuni stretched out his hand and bade us farewell. Foreigners had come before, he said, promised the world and delivered nothing. 'It will be different this time,' I insisted. 'The British people will soon know of your plight and will want to respond.'

Little did I realize just how quickly aid would be on its way.

## THE WORLD RESPONDS

For thirty years I believed I had been a faithful adherent to one of the most important journalistic codes — to report a story impartially without ever assuming a personal role in it. So it was with a troubled mind that I boarded the Swissair flight at Rinas Airport for my return to London.

Having discovered those naked, starving and forgotten children, I could do no other than make promises of help. Honouring such pledges, I thought, might prove extremely difficult at a time when there were so many other pressing needs in the Third World. Yet to know and not to respond would be unforgivable. There could be no going back on my word now, for it was abundantly clear that without substantial and immediate aid, thousands of innocent young victims in that sad country might not survive the hard Albanian winter.

Bhas Solanki was less anxious. He knew his camera had recorded some heartbreaking images of those pathetic children whose limbs were as thin as the catheters the hospital so badly needed. His own first child, Deepa, was just a few months old and he could hardly believe that in the middle of Europe any babies could have reached this desperate stage. Bhas's belief was that, given the strength of the pictures, the international community would react. He was right, though neither of us at that stage could have contemplated the size of the response from the British public alone, reaching over five million pounds.

Two of the smaller British-based charities, Feed the

Children and ADRA (the Adventist Development and Relief Agency) had been operating inside Albania for the previous four months, but were experiencing problems in generating interest in what was happening in the country. Their fears were that the public's general ignorance of the place would count heavily against their aid efforts.

Within minutes of the first pictures being transmitted, the scale of the problem there became apparent. Calls to the BBC from those seeking advice as to how they could help were an encouraging sign that people were sufficiently moved by what they had seen to want to contribute in some tangible way to help relieve the suffering.

There was also one particular stroke of good fortune. Bob Wheaton, the Editor of BBC Television's Breakfast News, had signed up his counterpart on *The Sunday Times*, Andrew Neil, to review the pages of the morning newspapers

The first consignment of aid arrives at Savra Camp.



in a specially assigned slot in the two-and-a-half-hour programme. While thumbing his way through the tabloids, Neil was distracted by the pictures on the bank of television screens in the reporters' office. The sight of the Albanian children losing the battle for life in hospitals without proper food or medicines affected him deeply and he determined *The Sunday Times* should launch an appeal to provide help for those in desperate need.

Feed the Children had extra telephones installed and a team of volunteers were hastily brought together to deal with the expected avalanche of calls. In the first few hours following publication of the appeal, seven hundred people telephoned offering cash and assistance. A massive bandwagon of help was beginning to roll.

Soon, lorry departures from the charity's Reading warehouse became a weekly occurrence. People from all over the South and Midlands arrived at the depot to unload vans, car boots, rucksacks and shopping bags. There were clothes, medical supplies, blankets and non-perishable food — all urgently required.

Supplies officer Peter Annereau intensified the search for trucks to carry the aid and an earlier appeal for Government funds was reinforced. The Charity's Executive Director, David Grubb, emphasized that the money they were receiving from the newspaper appeal was being directed at children, but they were not the only ones who were suffering. 'If we were to take aid only to children's hospitals and institutions and nothing for starving families, there would be riots.' The message was understood and Overseas Development Minister Lynda Chalker responded with an initial grant of fifty thousand pounds.

The money was spent the same day on purchases of rice, dried milk and other basic foods. Within fourteen hours of the grant being announced on BBC Television News, aid bought with the money was on its way and would be distributed by Feed the Children's own staff on the ground within a week. Many people who rang Feed the Children were in tears. Others demanded information on how they could get to Albania, regardless of how impractical that

would be. One caller asked, 'Would you like a ship?' PPI Lines Managing Director, Roland Swain, said he had a cargo vessel lying off Brixham and would be prepared to set sail for Albania within days. The problem now was how could they get the goods together in time?

The Western Morning News in Plymouth stepped in. They had already launched an appeal and readers were responding with generous cash donations. The Editor called a meeting. Plymouth Lions Club offered to help, so too did the Royal Navy. Local schools dispatched senior pupils to pack the crates, and a berth and loading facilities were arranged with the Naval Dockyards.

On loading day a line of lorries from every part of Britain stretched all the way from the quayside to the dock gates. The cargo came in all shapes and sizes. There were ten new chest freezers delivered from Norfrost's factory more than seven hundred miles away in Caithness. Cow and Gate provided thousands of teats and jars of baby food. The Body Shop gave 200,000 bars of soap. A major chocolate manufacturer donated over five tonnes of surplus stock. Ambrosia of Devon delivered pallets of tinned rice pudding (nutritious and, like the chocolate, something never seen by Albanian children before). Scores of other companies either donated goods or supplied them at big discounts.

If it all provided a little extra excitement for the ship's Polish crew then the adventure was only just beginning. The Safiye Sultan ran into two appalling storms, first in the Bay of Biscay and then in the Mediterranean. With 25 feet waves buffeting the vessel which was listing to 45 degrees, Captain Miron Babiak admitted there were times when he was deeply worried about the safety of both ship and crew.

Unloading the cargo at the Albanian port of Durres was equally hazardous. Such was the desperation for food that stevedores tried to siphon some of the supplies for themselves. Without helmets and wearing flip-flops, the dockers became exhausted within an hour. An unreliable crane subject to continual breakdowns meant unloading went on for three days.

In the end almost all the goods reached their intended

targets. The voyage must have cost the ship's owners tens of thousands of pounds, but it meant that the equivalent of fifteen juggernaut loads of essential foods and medicines had been delivered all at once and within a month of the original appeal.

Not to be outdone, Dan Air offered the use of a plane after First Officer David Rogers came up with a particularly bright idea. When the company's seasonal flights to Corfu cease at the end of each October, an empty aircraft has to be dispatched to the Greek Island to bring home the last of the tourists. Why not, Rogers thought, use the plane on the outward flight to take vitally-needed supplies to Albania which lies just a few miles across the Corfu Channel? He put the suggestion to the airline's bosses and they agreed to Feed the Children being offered all the space in the luggage holds. As the plane was departing from Manchester it gave pharmaceutical firms in the North-West the opportunity to donate drugs and intravenous feed. They duly obliged.

The operation ran like clockwork. On arrival at Corfu, customs formalities were completed within a few minutes and the medicines were ferried to the Albanian port of Saranda on board a converted British minesweeper.

At this time, disturbing reports reaching Feed the Children's Field Operations Director, Jeff Alderson spoke of a near calamitous situation in the mountainous northeastern districts. Winter was closing in, with temperatures expected to drop to minus 15 degrees Celsius. Unless supplies could be brought in quickly, the mountain roads would be impassable due to ice and snow. There are over 100 villages in this area ranging from 400 to 1,700 metres above sea level. Only 4 per cent of the land is cultivated due to the poor and undulating terrain, so the villagers are dependent on outside sources for almost all of their food supplies.

Alderson found school attendance down to 40 per cent due to the shortage of teachers and materials, but primarily, because the children had no shoes to walk the frozen mountain trails from their homes.

Delivering supplies in such difficult conditions was a severe test for the most experienced of aid workers. In one stone cottage they found a little girl clad in a few rags sitting on the edge of an old metal bed-frame. Apart from three home-made wooden stools, it was the only item of furniture in the two-roomed building which she shared with her parents and six brothers and sisters as well as the family's pig and six goats. Most of the family were sleeping on bracken laid out on the dirt floor. Split logs were used as pillows. They cooked over an open fire using two battered aluminium bowls. They also had a plastic jug and three spoons. These were their sole possessions.

'For the winter,' Annereau noted, 'they had saved some sweetcorn, onions and figs which they had grown on tiny strips of land in the steep-sided valley in the mountains.'

Cold nights sleeping on the bracken have now given way to the comfort of beds donated by King's College Choir School, Cambridge!

The joy for everyone involved in the Albanian relief programme has been to see the help so generously given by the British people actually reaching those in need and to witness at first hand the reactions of people who for so long had felt abandoned by the outside world.

There could be no better example of this than the welcome the aid convoy received at the Hospital for Mentally Handicapped Children in Shkoder as the first assignment of aid paid for by readers of *The Sunday Times* arrived within a fortnight of our latest report on BBC Television's Breakfast News. If the speed of delivery seemed something of a miracle to the hospital staff, then Bhas Solanki and myself felt the hand of Providence had intervened to enable us to record this exciting sequel. For just a few hours before, we had met with an unfortunate accident which had looked certain to mar the whole occasion.

After a journey of six days and nights, the aid lorries were escorted into a refrigeration plant on the southern outskirts of the city which was in use as a temporary warehouse. The hospital matron decided to stay there all night to guard the boxes of food and clothes against a possible invasion



Survival existence for a family in a small mountain hut.

A patchwork blanket lovingly worked and donated by orphans in Dublin who each knitted a square.





Albert languishing in a rusted cot at the Hospital for Mentally Handicapped Children in Shkoder. He has no energy to swot away the flies (August 91).

Albert seven months later. British aid and attention has given him a new zest for life! (March 92.)





British eye surgeon, Nick Jacobs, examines Anila before restoring her sight.
Stimulation . . . a child responds to physiotherapy treatment by an





Six babies share one incubator at Elbasan.

Saving a life . . . the first incubator arrives from Britain.





A young person's country . . . Albania, the only country in Europe with more children than adults.



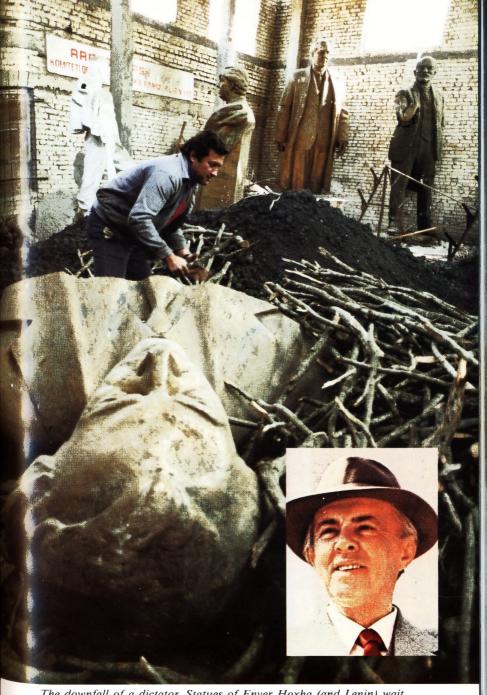
A lad is taught a new experience in eating biscuits after being found trying to swallow a whole one without chewing it.

Clinging on . . . inside Elbasan Psychiatric Hospital . . . it's minus 7°C and the heating never comes on.



Counting votes by candle-light as another power cut plunges Tirana into darkness during Election Night 1992.





The downfall of a dictator. Statues of Enver Hoxha (and Lenin) wait to be melted down in a Tirana scrapyard. Inset, Enver Hoxha.



In from the cold . . . 110,000 people celebrate the end of Communism in Albania. March 1992.



by local gangs or starving townspeople searching frantically for scraps of food for their children. Solanki attached his camera to the tripod to enable him to take some wider shots of the operation. Then, moving forward to film a close-up, he suddenly lost his balance on the stony, uneven ground. The lens took the full force of the fall and telescoped into the body of the camera. There was enormous sympathy from the British aid team, but nothing anyone could do to repair the damage.

Here we were, 2,000 miles from home, in a town where people were fighting for a loaf of bread. The chances of finding a replacement camera were non-existent. What were we to tell our News Editor, Nick Guthrie, about this slice of bad luck and, more importantly, how were we to provide him — and the thousands of viewers who had generously contributed to the aid convoy — with pictures of the relief supplies reaching Albania's desperate children? We looked at each other in silence, the sense of frustration and disappointment overwhelming.

There was just one outside chance of retrieving the situation. To minimize the risk of a riot in Shkoder, it had been decided to transfer the hospital consignment on to local trucks. That meant the delivery being delayed until mid-morning the next day. Nursing staff arrived to help the Feed the Children team sort through the supplies and reload them throughout the hours of darkness.

There were now a few hours to spare. Although it was already late evening, we decided to head south to Tirana, earnestly hoping that at first light we might somehow persuade the Director of Albanian Television to open his basement strong-room on the off chance that we might stumble across a compatible camera.

On arriving in the capital, our interpreter, Vjollca Dedej, said she had a faint recollection of the home address of the television service's chief cameraman. It took just minutes to track him down. He emerged from his high-rise flat carrying a German-made camera which he had taken possession of that very afternoon. What is more, he had been burning the midnight oil busily browsing through all the instruction

manuals he could find. The problem was that none of them carried an Albanian translation! He handed the camera to Solanki at once and anxious to find out how well it could operate under difficult conditions, he leapt into our vehicle as we turned straight back to Shkoder. Not only did we have a replacement camera — we now had a willing assistant too!

If we were highly relieved to be back in business then our joy paled into insignificance when compared to the ecstasy of those handicapped children whose wretched existence had brought such a profound and urgent response from the people of Britain. Barefoot and still wearing their pathetic rags, they rushed down the stairs and into the filthy courtyard as the lorries burst through the rusty gates of the home. Sugar, soap, tea and baby food were hurried to a first floor room with a double door, two locks and two padlocked bolts.

As the initial excitement died down, the children were summoned one by one to an adjoining room stacked with brown cardboard boxes. It was fitting out time; an entirely new experience but one to be enjoyed to the full.

Sunday Times reporter, Margarette Driscoll, noticed a look of bewilderment crossing the face of 3-year-old Eglantina Bizi as a nurse led her into the room. The shoes that appeared from the boxes were a mystery to her and she watched in surprise as the nurse helped her put them on. Other barefoot children in the doorway began to laugh and shout, pleading to be next.

One little boy, overjoyed, leaned forward, lifted each foot in turn, and kissed his shoes. In that fleeting moment, I suddenly realized how much I take for granted. God gives abundantly, but how often do we pause to say thank you?

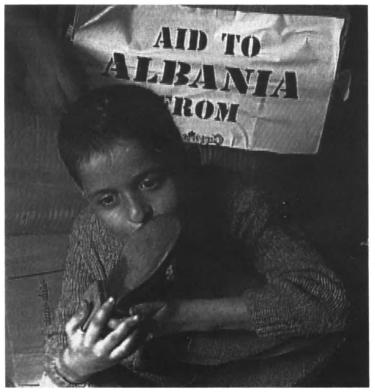
Within weeks of the delivery there was to be a further heartbreak at Shkoder. In a well-orchestrated attack, a violent mob, brandishing knives, burst into the hospital, broke down the door to the store, looted the premises and even ripped the winter clothes off the children's backs. Feed the Children might have pulled out in disgust, but that would have meant abandoning the very children they had set out to help and who had been traumatised by the

events many had feared but did not know how to control.

It was decided the hospital would have to be made more secure. Yet without a significant increase in deliveries to the town itself, it seemed highly unlikely that future incidents of this sort could be avoided. Both objectives were achieved.

Now, at last, there are signs of improvement in the state of the hospital and the overall welfare of the children. London physiotherapist Kit Evered, who has prepared a report on the basic necessities for the Albanian Ministry of Health, says simple, solid equipment that can be put to use straight away is the immediate answer.

A young boy in the Hospital for Mentally Handicapped Children at Shkoder, excitedly kisses his first pair of shoes.



## THE WINDOW

written in response to the author's TV report on the forgotten children of Albania

How children love to see a Christmas window — Its multi-coloured strands of fairy light. Toys peeping through the gilded sprays of holly, While dolls and teddy bears complete the sight.

Now Santa Claus arrives with modern parcels — Sophisticated gifts of every kind — Talking dolls, computer games and videos as well; All in the Christmas window well designed.

Now we have looked into another window — No festive sparkle ever glistens there, But sad, neglected children of Albania; We see their squalor as they cringe in fear.

We watch one little chap — we'll call him Tim — Who shuffled forward with inquisitive surprise, The TV camera focusing on his pathetic rags. He screened his face, tormented by the flies.

Huge crates arrived amid excited laughter, For British conscience made the cheque books sing! The children joyfully displayed their garments, Hugged their toys and formed a jolly ring.

Yes, Tim was there all dressed in sweat-shirt glory. He danced as if he had a secret fuse! He grinned, sat down, his little legs apart, Then raised them one by one, and kissed his shoes.

Albert E. Mingay, (Retired Commissioner of The Salvation Army).

It was also encouraging to meet two young British nursery nurses, Joanne and Louise, who had the hospital staff watching in disbelief as they engaged the children in play. An old tin can rolled back and forth across the cold stone floor was enough to raise a smile from a child for so long deprived of any means of stimulation, never mind the simple pleasures of life.

Over a hundred miles away relief was arriving too, for the residents of Elbasan Psychiatric Hospital where we had discovered hundreds of patients sleeping on broken bed springs. Ward closures at a hospital at Leavesden in Hertfordshire led to the charity ADRA being given an open invitation to take what they wanted. Beds, lockers, mirrors and chairs were immediately loaded for an imminent aid mission to Albania. Arriving at the Elbasan institution, truck drivers Mike Smoker and Cyril Willmott could not believe how anyone could survive in such horrifying conditions.

'The only way I could describe it,' Smoker said, 'was to imagine myself standing in an open bus shelter, wearing only a pair of pyjama trousers, with a fierce wind blowing straight into my face and the temperature ten degrees below freezing. Yet some patients told us they had lived for thirty years or more like this!'

ADRA's Executive Director (Trans-Europe), John Arthur, had been quick to respond to urgent pleas for help and was pressing ahead with programmes for longer term aid aimed at leading the Albanian people towards self-sufficiency. His charity's Trans-European headquarters are literally a stone's throw from my home in St. Albans, yet I was to meet him for the first time under the most bizarre circumstances in a sixth-floor room at the Hotel Tirana which overlooks Skanderbeg Square right in the heart of the Albanian capital.

Arthur had flown in from London that afternoon and on arrival at the hotel ran into a series of problems.

In an attempt to conserve electricity there were no light bulbs in the main foyer with a brightness of more than 60 watts. In this dismal setting, registration took at least forty-five minutes. Four carbon copies of detailed forms had to be checked and filed. Eventually he was allocated Room 608. He piled his luggage into the lift, pressed the appropriate button, ascended one and a half floors, and then . . . bang! The light went out. The lift stopped and all Arthur could do was sit on his case. Sometimes, power cuts in Tirana can last for a week and he was beginning to wonder whether he had packed enough cereal in his bag to ensure survival! On this occasion he was fortunate. The power supply was switched on again after a mere twenty minutes.

On reaching the sixth floor he made his way to Room 608. Opening the door he was subjected to an instant shower! Water was pouring through the light fittings in the ceiling and forming a large pool on the floor. Arthur ignored this for a second and proceeded to the bathroom. It wasn't long before he discovered that the toilet flush mechanism would not operate. However, there was a bucket nearby and it was evident this had to be filled from the bath tap and then used as an alternative to the flush. The only problem was that the plastic bucket had a large hole in the bottom and was incapable of holding a drop of water!

When Arthur protested to the maid about his predicament, about the possibility of the whole building going up in smoke and about the horrendous repair bill should the water seep through six floors of the hotel, all she could say in broken English was, 'No pipe, no ladder, no plumber.'

She did, however, promise to call a *teknik* (highly skilled technician). Five minutes later, there was a knock at Arthur's door.

'Come straight in, there are a few problems to be sorted out in here,' he exclaimed.

'I can see you're in a spot of bother,' I answered, 'but I wouldn't know where to start. I'm not a plumber . . . I'm from the BBC!'

This strange encounter signalled the start of a very close friendship which would take us to the European Commission in Brussels, and to dozens of schools, churches and town and village halls across the United Kingdom in efforts to keep the needs of Albania high in the consciousness of the British people.

Arthur had long cherished the ideal of children helping children. He proudly displayed the slogan on his posters.

Schools were an obvious target and his campaign was given a substantial boost when a talented group of fifth and sixth formers at Henry Gotch Comprehensive School in Kettering produced their own rock number 'What can you give?' The Northamptonshire pupils had already opened links with the Dystrophic Hospital in Tirana and were keen to encourage other schools to become involved.

Several, including the Royal Grammar School at High Wycombe and St. Albans High School for Girls, raised sufficient funds to purchase their own infant ventilators for children's hospitals in the most critical areas of Albania. Each one of the machines, doctors said, could save the lives of up to 400 children a year. Schools, setting a target of a few hundred pounds, collected six thousand and more. There were non-uniform days, fast days, marathon days and sit in silence days. . . . All were highly profitable days.

Many churches and schools also donated food and cash from their Harvest Festivals. In Caernarvon I watched tearfully as little children, still barely able to walk, stood excitedly at the back of a lorry waiting to hand over their most precious possession. There were tears as they let go of teddy, yet even at such a tender age they seemed to sense their sacrifice was going to provide a little happiness for someone else. One teenager, Rachel Warren, persuaded all her friends to follow the Sri Lankan tradition by performing Indian dances across the country. The Salvation Army Corps at Bedford handed an entire weekend's activity over to the cause. Barbershop Harmony Singing even threatened to upstage the efforts of the Corps Band! Even my own son David caught 'the bug', organizing magic shows in a Welsh holiday hotel.

By October 1992 ADRA had purchased seventeen ventilators, most of them from Bear International in Switzerland, whose Eastern European representative also happens to be the Albanian Consul in his own country. With a distinguished military record, including service in Vietnam, John McGough even had a Chinese-made helicopter gunship put at his disposal by the Albanian Air

Force to speed up the process of getting the vital medical equipment to hospitals the length and breadth of the country. It also meant easier access to remote mountain villages where children's parcels from British schools are providing a much-needed cushion against the severe winter conditions.

In December 1991 Father Christmas returned to Albanian soil for the first time in thirty years. In the mountain settlement of Kolonja, Santa's pilot had to come to the good man's rescue as scores of young children threatened to take the spirit of goodwill too far. In other villages like Qidher, warning shots were fired across the heads of desperate families as they fought for food boxes brought in by helicopter. It was the first food to reach that area for over two months.

Like Feed the Children, ADRA want to avoid building up dependency. Both charities say they want to work with local communities, not for them.

Arthur's charity has been assigned 1.5 hectares of land in Tirana for the construction of a warehouse to store future



Up in the remote mountain villages aid is flown in by helicopter.

relief supplies, micro industry units for developing job skills, an educational centre concentrating on language and business and computer studies, a health clinic emphasizing hygiene, nutrition and disease prevention, and an accommodation block to house volunteers prepared to give short-term assistance in the country. Funding is also being sought for building a baby food factory.

These are rapid advances for the director of an organization who, in 1991, wondered whether he would manage to return from his first aid trip to Albania without sustaining serious injury. 'I shall never forget entering the town of Kruje at the wheel of a seven-ton truck. An angry mob was returning from a political rally. Some of them signalled us to stop but my son Andrew, my co-driver, decided we should take no chances. The crowd grew by the second and then a few agitators decided to lie down on the road directly in front of us. We had no option but to apply the brakes! At that point half a dozen young protesters climbed on to the front bumper and the running boards of the truck. Like a flash of lighning they grabbed the windscreen wipers, ready to break them from their mountings, and they thumped on the cab roof. I wound down the side window and firmly requested them to stop. "We have just delivered relief supplies to your capital, Tirana. Our vehicle is now empty. Please let us through as we are on our way home!" I shouted, hoping that somebody would understand English. Suddenly the ringleader bawled a few words in the local dialect. The louts jumped off the vehicle, the protesters lying on the road got up, and we were waved through. A perilous situation had been averted, but it was a close shave!'

In addition to the efforts of the recognized charities (a list of which can be found at the end of this book), many smaller groups and individuals have driven their own supplies direct to Albania by a variety of European routes. The people of the Shetland Islands filled four juggernauts, put them on the overnight boat to Aberdeen and then continued overland. Edinburgh has given generous help to Albania's lung hospital and a Baptist minister's wife in

Wales targeted a hundred towns and collected well over a quarter of a million pounds' worth of goods.

The list is endless. A Sussex couple, Roy and Hilary Loosley, who have made six aid trips in a year, when asked whether they would go again, had no hesitation in replying: 'You bet your sweet life!'

Unlike the former Soviet Union, Albania is small enough for every contribution to make a noticeable difference. With a few unfortunate exceptions, aid has been getting through to those who need it most, but so great is that need that it is, as yet, only scratching the surface.

What has arrived has, in many instances, been the result of great personal sacrifice. Above all, it has shown that single-minded determination can put ordinary individuals right at the forefront of the aid effort.

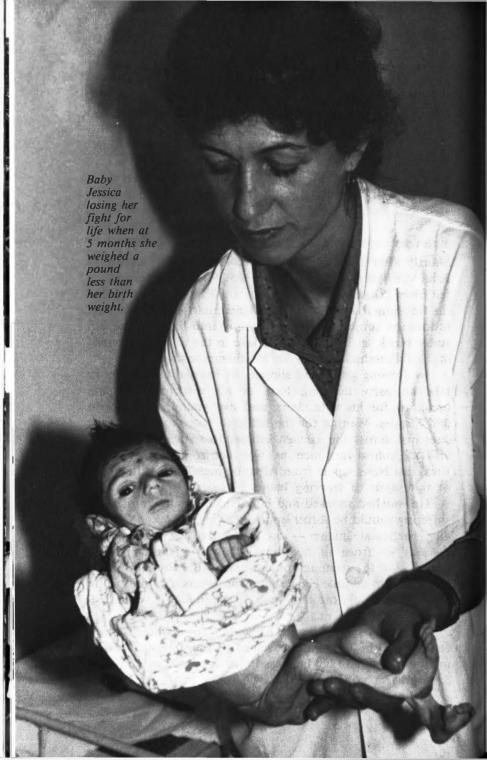
## THE KARATE CONNECTION

Shortly after seven on a bitterly cold September morning, John van Weenen awoke from a deep sleep. He had rarely felt more exhausted. The previous night he had just applied the finishing touches to a new kitchen, part of an ambitious restoration project aimed at lovingly transforming the old stable block set high above the lake in the idyllic surroundings of Fineshade Abbey in Northamptonshire.

In dressing gown and slippers he hurried downstairs to take an early morning look at his work and prepare breakfast for his wife, Jane, and two young sons, Haydn and Mansel. Waiting for the kettle to come to the boil, he stretched across the kitchen cabinet to switch on the television. Almost at once he was confronted by a BBC Breakfast News report from Albania, highlighting the plight of thousands of starving babies.

He watched shocked and horrified that such intolerable suffering should be thrust upon such tiny, innocent victims. One particular image — on the screen for barely three seconds — froze in his mind. It was a stark, painful portrayal of the seeming hopelessness of the situation there. Yet it was to completely reshape van Weenen's outlook on life, and set a very ordinary man on the road to a very extraordinary achievement.

The picture which was to haunt him for a whole month, centred on the desperate existence of baby Jessica. Badly malnourished, she lay helpless in a rusted cot weighing, at 5 months, a pound less than when she was born.



I remember her well. A doctor had beckoned me to her bedside after I detected the faint cry of a tiny baby in obvious pain. He picked her up, her entire emaciated body resting in the cradle of his hand.

There was nothing that could be done. Within days, Jessica was dead. In the hospital, you could sense a feeling of overwhelming relief that her painful yet eventful life was over without further affliction.

For four days Jessica had been crammed with ten thousand other Albanian refugees on that rusty freighter as her parents made a futile bid to flee to the West, but the Italians — overwhelmed by the sheer size of the exodus — had sent them back.

Arben and Mimoza Nexhipi have resumed their wretched lives in a squalid room in the Adriatic port of Durres. They married in their teens and have two other children. Mimoza feels a sense of guilt over Jessica's death, but says that for days the family had nothing to eat, only rags on their backs, and not a lek in their pockets to buy a bottle of water for the terrifying voyage. Mimoza has never worked. Arben lost his job when he developed tuberculosis. They depend on charity to survive.

It would have been easy for van Weenen to sit back, shrug his shoulders and do nothing. Many faced with such horrors on television news bulletins feel totally inadequate, unable to respond in any meaningful way. What can any individual do in such circumstances that can make any tangible difference? Some sink into the depths of despair, others stretch for handbag or wallet to make a financial contribution. Most, conditioned to scenes of hunger and suffering, mutter a word or two of sympathy and take things no further, preferring to busy themselves in whatever pressing engagements are lined up for any particular day.

What then was to be done? That evening, as he joined friends for dinner, van Weenen had a troubled conscience. Unable to eat anything put in front of him, his mind was already formulating the plan for a staggering humanitarian aid operation.

Van Weenen had two factors in his favour. He had a

personal understanding of the real meaning of suffering and an organization behind him whose efforts he could motivate to maximum advantage.

His early background suggested not the merest spark of initiative. Born into a working class family at Enfield in Middlesex, John was given little or no encouragement at home and left school at 14 with no qualifications. He looked upon himself as one of life's failures, drifting from job to job and lacking any purpose or direction.

Celebrating his coming of age at 21, he decided there must be more to life. With his two younger brothers, Garry and Jeff, he set sail for Australia, among the last Britons to take advantage of the assisted passage scheme. It cost them just £10 each. In July 1964 they boarded the S.S. Iberia at Tilbury and after an incident-filled voyage through the Suez Canal, arrived in Australia some six weeks later.

The three rented a house overlooking the beach at Adelaide, quickly settling down to a new and exciting life-style.

In December they had an experience that was to shatter their faith in the new world. One evening, without warning, there was a knock at the door. The landlord's agent was insisting all three must be out of the house the next day. Van Weenen protested: 'As we pay the rent weekly, surely we are entitled to a week's notice to quit.'

More threatening calls followed and then, on the Friday, when the three were cleaning and tidying the house ready to depart that night, the landlord arrived in person accompanied by three bodyguards. A Polish immigrant, six feet four inches tall and sporting a vast twenty stone frame, he set about them. Van Weenen was thrown to the ground and savagely beaten. By the time the police arrived he was almost unconscious. His jaw and nose broken, for three weeks he lay in hospital, a metal plate attached to the side of his face to hold it in place.

With plenty of time for reflection, there seemed only one course to follow. Learning one code of the martial arts was essential if he was to defend himself against any similar attack in the future. No sooner released from hospital, he joined a karate club. A clear mission in mind, he trained rigorously for three hours every day, his sole motivation one of revenge.

Six months later, strolling down Adelaide's King William Street, he spotted his former landlord walking in the opposite direction. His heart was full of hate. Vengeance the only thought that crossed his mind. Yet as he gazed at his adversary, by now just a few feet away, he suddenly became aware of his own abilities. 'I knew I could not only beat him into submission, but break every bone in his body in the process. In that instant, my thirst for revenge and justice simply melted away.'

Though failing to realize it at the time, he was espousing many of the noblest principles of karate — confidence and physical fitness, but with them the virtues of honour and consideration. These were qualities that were certainly to be brought to the fore in van Weenen's mercy missions to Albania.

He stayed only a short time in Australia, later leaving England again with two friends for Japan to master the art of Shotokan Karate as perfected by its most famous exponent, Gichin Funakoshi. It was a difficult road. In the early days, penniless, jobless and friendless, they had to summon up a tremendous amount of inner strength just to survive.

Today, having trained for thirty years with the great names of the style, van Weenen is now the Chief Instructor of the Traditional Association of Shotokan Karate, or TASK as it is more popularly known.

In 1990 his remarkable powers of persuasion, organization and leadership were put to the test. His closest friend, Eddie Whitcher, big in stature and mild in manner, was diagnosed as suffering from terminal bowel cancer. He had been an extremely gifted exponent of karate. According to van Weenen he was a purist in the true sense of the word, seeking neither material gain nor recognition. His Japanese wife, Toshiko, asked the doctor what help he could offer. 'Take him home,' was the curt reply, 'there's nothing I or anyone else can do.'



John van Weenen (left) has an audience with Albania's president Sali Berisha.

Visiting him at The Royal London Hospital, van Weenen was shocked by his frail, gaunt appearance. Over the years he had watched him fight the best the Japanese Karate Association had to offer, and beat them all. How could he have known the real enemy would come from within?

Professor Norman Williams was in charge of his treatment. He was moved by the courage and fortitude shown by Eddie in times of great pain and suffering. He did everything humanly possible, but sadly was unable to save his life.

Van Weenen, though, could sense the frustration being experienced by the medical unit through lack of finance to fund vital research into finding a cure for this dreadful disease and so 'Karate versus Cancer' was born. In all, the campaign was to span nine months and involve a thousand young karate students in endless hours of fund raising and self sacrifice. It all culminated in each of them throwing ten thousand punches at TASK's hombu in Bedford. The target had been £50,000. The final total reached more than three times that — £158,000.

It was as if van Weenen's ingenuity knew no bounds. One of the most insignificant exercises he undertook turned out to be the most productive. A motor agent gave him a brand new Ford Fiesta at trade price.

'Pay for it in a year', he was told. Van Weenen put it on a trailer, took it round a hundred shows all over the country and sold raffle tickets. 'We collected £75,000, yet the car itself cost a mere £4,900!'

Such efforts flashed quickly through van Weenen's mind as he reasoned how best to respond to the picture of baby Jessica which had left him in such distress. Albania was a country he knew absolutely nothing about. It lay two thousand miles away on the other side of Europe, 'a kind of forbidden land isolated from everywhere and everybody'. Yet that baby had left such a marked impression. 'A pathetic little figure, so forlorn and in such obvious pain. It was almost as if she knew she was doomed.'

It was to be another month before things began to fall in place. Van Weenen lives in the adjoining constituency to Prime Minister John Major's Huntingdon seat, and he accepted an invitation to attend the Conservative Party Conference at Blackpool. It was to be his first political excursion for several years.

He had once been involved in Tory party activities in mid-Bedfordshire and even considered standing for Parliament, believing it to be the way to improve the lot of local people. After four years he became totally disillusioned. 'I discovered how devious many politicians are, how untruthful they often become, telling lies through omission. It was all totally alien to my karate philosophy. Once I was called on to make a speech on civil defence at the Brighton Conference. I was so frightened and nervous, I ignored the Press who were chasing me, walked straight out of the main door, crossed over to the seafront and never went back to politics again.'

That is until his invitation to Blackpool in October 1991. The Winter Gardens were filled to capacity for Mrs. Thatcher's first appearance on the platform since her departure from Downing Street. She rose to speak, empha-

sized the need for help for the emerging democracies of Eastern Europe and told the delegates there was someone she wished to introduce. Turning to a tall, dark-haired man sitting near the edge of the platform she announced: 'This is Dr. Sali Berisha, leader of the Democratic Party of Albania.' The delegates rose to their feet and gave him a standing ovation that was clearly exceptional both in its sincerity and intensity.

Providence had lent the very hand John van Weenen had been looking for. In an instant he knew: 'This is the man I have to talk to . . . this is the man that will make things happen . . . this is the answer to my prayers.'

Then consternation! As Berisha left the dais, the vast security network that surrounded the platform party prevented van Weenen from getting anywhere within reach. By the time he had managed to wrestle his way through to the stage door, Berisha had gone. For three days he walked the streets of Blackpool in his desperation to find him. Eventually, a leading Conservative Party figure told him: 'He's still in town. I know he has to be in the lobby of the Pembroke Hotel at twelve o'clock tomorrow. He's due to meet Mrs. Thatcher again.' This time nothing was going to stop van Weenen. He pushed his way past the security guards and running up to Berisha, exclaimed: 'I simply must speak to you. I have got trucks and aid to bring to Albania.'

'I'll see you at four,' came the reply.

At four o'clock van Weenen was pacing up and down in the lobby, but Berisha wasn't there. Then suddenly the hotel doors swung open and an unmistakable figure came running, breathless and apologetic in van Weenen's direction. Glancing nervously at his watch, Berisha shouted, 'Mr. van Weenen, I'm sorry I'm late. It's two minutes past four.'

'Don't worry.'

'Actually, I was having a talk with Mrs. Thatcher and I broke it off to come and see you.'

'You shouldn't have done that. I'm just an ordinary person.'

'Mr. van Weenen, so am I.'

Cynical observers might have viewed it as an astute political retort, but somehow van Weenen felt a sense of heartfelt sincerity. The bond of friendship between the karate teacher and the future President of Albania was already being forged.

For ten minutes the two men sat down together. What could van Weenen do? When and how should he come? He simply did not know, nor did Berisha. Neither knew the best route to take. Berisha had never been to Britain before. He gave van Weenen the telephone number of his flat in Tirana; 'Give me a ring when you get there. I'll help you all I can.' At that they parted, van Weenen's mission looking fanciful if not downright outrageous.

Realizing that there was no way he could begin fundraising without acquiring some basic information, van Weenen left for Albania. Berisha sent a car to meet him at the airport, took him home for dinner, still almost unable to comprehend why a group of ordinary British people should wish to become involved. Van Weenen looked at the logistics, visited warehouses and broke down as he saw at first hand the intensity of the suffering. Convinced he could do something, he returned to England.

There were, however, two major obstacles. He had no money and as yet, not a single person had been approached to help get his project under way.

First reactions were wholly predictable. 'You'll never do it. You're an absolute fool! You won't even get halfway. You'll be stopped, there's a war on in Yugoslavia . . . forget it.'

Van Weenen's response was to ignore them all. Karate had taught him that the only way to perfect any technique is to concentrate on one thing at a time. Even if you have to repeat the exercise a hundred times, you'll get it right in the end. In Albania, children were dying in their hundreds. There was a job to be done, and not a minute to lose.

Faced with such single-minded determination, van Weenen's students knew there was only one answer. They simply had to get on with it.

An open letter was sent to every member of TASK.

Everyone must lend a hand. The idea of helping people in such dire trouble was a noble one, going to the very heart of all they were striving for in the practice of karate.

Specific targets were set, even though van Weenen knew that at this stage they might prove impossible to meet. 'On 25 January 1992,' he announced, 'a convoy of TASK lorries will leave Bedford for Albania loaded with supplies. The trip will take twelve days and the convoy will be accompanied by a support team of karate students. This campaign will not be long and protracted and will require very little time and effort. However that little effort from everyone is vital to the success of the whole operation.'

Van Weenen knew full well it was the understatement of the year.

He had twenty-five karate clubs spread across twenty-five towns, most of them situated in the Midlands and the South. The job now was to entice public involvement as well.

Small advertisements were inserted in the national Press. There was a desperate need for children's clothing, baby food, toys, bed and cot linen and medical supplies. School-children were asked to approach their headmaster with a view to the school starting a collection. Anyone with contacts with clothing, food or pharmaceutical companies was asked to get in touch with them immediately and plead for assistance.

Would it all be a cry in the dark or were there really people out there anxious and willing to respond to the call? Was this an ego trip or was God the motivator behind it all, spurring him on and urging him to put his undoubted organizational talent to maximum use? These were the questions that lay heavily on van Weenen's mind.

The plan was simple and straightforward.

Bedford would serve as the headquarters for the whole operation. From this wheel hub — twenty-five spokes would project out — each of them leading to one of the twenty-five towns where his karate clubs were located. On top of all this, he envisaged at least another 100 cities and towns becoming involved through the initial efforts of just one volunteer.

The concept worked almost to the letter. Within minutes

of his advertisement appearing, the telephone at Fineshade began to ring incessantly. The first caller from Edinburgh. A box of babies nappies — where should they be sent?

Van Weenen listened politely. 'Thank you. Now would you do something more for me? If you really want to help, there is something I would ask you to undertake right away. Pop down to your local newspaper, tell the editor you're collecting for Task Force Albania, mention your address and ask him to put a few lines in next week's edition. You'll be surprised how many people will want to help.'

A few days later and the callers were back on the line. Van Weenen could sense the desperation — even panic — this time. 'We simply can't cope. Our homes are full. My husband's complaining he can't get into the bathroom. My children are tripping up all over the place, there's just so much stuff. You'll have to bail me out!'

Van Weenen was prepared. 'You'll have to get on to your priest or minister. Get him to give you a church hall or try the school or the local council. They'll find you somewhere.'

Within a couple of weeks, another frantic call: 'The vicar wants the hall emptied. . . . The school says we'll have to get out, they've cancelled PE lessons because the gymnasium is jammed to the roof. How are we to get all the bags to you?'

The job now was to remain absolutely calm; 'Pop down to the paper again. Get them to print another paragraph or two asking if there's anyone out there with a truck who would be willing to collect and bring everything to Bedford. You'll be surprised at the response. Lots of people have been waiting for such an opportunity . . . they just don't know how to go about it.'

Soon, a vast array of pantechnicons were weaving their way across country lanes and on to the M1 en route for Bedford. Van Weenen's initial belief was that he would fill three trucks. The evidence told a very different story. Over 740 tons of food, clothes and medicines which would fill no fewer than twenty 39-ton lorries, and so far the entire operation had cost not a single penny.

Getting the aid to Albania was an entirely different mat-

ter. Evaluating the money that would be required for diesel, ferry fares and documentation, it was decided to hand the job over to a firm of professional road hauliers. Van Weenen's job now was to raise £1,800 a truck. Given his administrative abilities, that was achieved within days.

As the target date approached, it became obvious that a team of volunteers, even working around the clock, could not sort through, label and pack the vast amount of aid which now occupied half of a sprawling industrial estate.

The police, army and even the American Air Force were contacted. Scores of servicemen and police cadets were hurriedly dispatched. By day and night the loading continued apace.

At precisely two o'clock on Sunday 25 January the Lord Lieutenant of Bedfordshire signalled the lorries on their way. As they swept out of the compound in driving rain to the accompaniment of 'Land of Hope and Glory' booming from the loudspeakers, van Weenen could not have imagined the drama that lay ahead.

He had met the drivers just a couple of hours before. Most were self-employed, a good blend of youth and experience. Though apprehensive of what might be involved, the spirit was one of ebullience.

The convoy extended for a mile as it negotiated its way over the new Dartford Bridge and down the M2 to Dover. The entire top deck of a P & O super ferry was required to transport the lorries and the Range Rover support vehicles to the Belgian port of Zeebrugge.

On sped the convoy through Germany, Czechoslovakia and into Hungary. Approaching Budapest, van Weenen, fatigued after a nine-hour stint at the wheel, pulled into a service area and asked a freelance cameraman, Tim Eyrl, who was travelling with him in one of the Range Rovers to take over. Eyrl's colleague, Annabel, remained in the back seat.

The Task Force lorries in radio contact had gone ahead. The other support vehicles were behind. As darkness descended, Eyrl pulled out into the motorway, van Weenen as yet to secure his seatbelt.

The Range Rover filed into the inside lane of the three-lane highway. Within seconds, a dark coloured lorry was detected just a few feet in front. It had no lights. Realizing the imminence of a collision, Eyrl swung the wheel violently to the left. At 70 miles an hour the Range Rover went out of control. It careered across all three lanes, hit the central crash barrier and then rebounded into the side of the lorry they had vainly tried to overtake. Eyrl had lost complete control and van Weenen could not get to the steering wheel because he was being thrown in all directions as a result of failing to fasten his seat belt in time.

The vehicle slewed again, this time across the centre lane before careering towards the last barrier guarding the motorway from a 500 feet drop into a wooded ravine. 'Being a tall vehicle I thought the Range Rover was going to go right over, but it hit the barrier at a slight angle and ricocheted up the hard shoulder before finally coming to a halt. It was a complete write-off. By rights we should have been killed. All our equipment — food, clothes and our plans for the entire journey — had disappeared out of the window and were lost. If ever we needed a signal from the Almighty that He wanted the mission completed, then this was it.'

Within twelve hours the three were able to obtain a replacement car. Dazed, but relatively unscathed, they were on their way to Yugoslavia, having by now lost all contact with the convoy.

The nightmare, though, was far from over. The lorry drivers had pulled up at a pre-determined stopping place near Belgrade. Van Weenen arrived there the following day. With midnight approaching and suffering from delayed shock and a grave lack of sleep, all he wanted to do was get straight into bed.

Two of his karate students intervened. They were sorry, they said, but he faced enormous problems. 'There's a mutiny in the camp. The truck drivers have decided to call it a day.' Getting closer to the Albanian border they were feeling decidedly unhappy. One had been in touch with his wife who told him a trucker had been killed and that vehicles were being attacked and ransacked. 'Some were

getting panicky . . . and they had been drinking. These were professional lorry drivers and they wanted a meeting that minute. My chaps said they'd come in too, but I feared that would cause a confrontation and given the state that some of the drivers were in, they would have been annihilated if it had come to blows.'

There was nothing else for it. Van Weenen went into the room alone.

For five and a half hours he was subjected to a barrage of angry protests. Then he addressed every complaint in turn until at last tempers began to cool and the truckers shook hands in an obvious display of reassurance. They were an essential part of the team and as such would be properly looked after. 'But I had another twenty men to wet nurse and they were a very big problem at the time.' It had been another close shave for van Weenen, but his faith in his venture had still not wavered.

Despite the war in Serbia, the convoy experienced no problems, but crossing into Macedonia they ran into deep snowdrifts. Many of the mountain passes were virtually impassable. Chaos ensued as lorries began to lose their grip on the treacherous surface. Some slid off the road and into a ditch. Van Weenen urged the drivers to attach chains to their tyres only to be told that they hadn't brought any. In Skopje, a blacksmith was pressed into service to provide a dozen pairs and the push continued towards Albania.

At the border everything again came to a standstill. Such was the disorganization of the Albanian guards that it took fourteen hours of cajoling before the convoy was allowed in.

On through the polluted industrial city of Elbasan and darkness was descending as the party arrived at an important crossroads. Here, eleven of the lorries were scheduled to turn left along the valley to Kavaja, the other nine to be sent across the mountains and on to Tirana and Shkoder.

The team stopped briefly to consult maps and check the listings locating the exact position of the food and medicines on each truck. Within two minutes the cry went up, 'We're being attacked.' Dozens of people had emerged from the fields, surrounded a number of the lorries and were slashing at the tilt sheets with machetes. The tarpaulins were ripped open and organized teams were rushing into the lorries to remove the boxes one at a time.

Van Weenen, fearing the worst, ordered his men into the cabs to remove the baseball bats they'd brought along just in case the locals fancied a sporting challenge somewhere along the way. Together, they charged down the road wielding their bats in anger. The ploy worked. Wondering what might come next, the raiders disappeared just as quickly as they had come.

By the time the convoy reached Kavaja the whole city was in complete darkness. Representatives of the Democratic Party were waiting and the lorries were escorted to an armed warehouse five miles outside the town. Everyone had wanted to deliver straight to the starving townspeople. They were told that this would spark a riot. So the Army guarded the load overnight, and next day everything did get through to those in need. Other deliveries would not prove so straightforward.

Parked overnight in Tirana, the nine remaining lorry drivers were terrified. In an enclosed compound, they watched in horror as the guards, equipped with their Chinese-made rifles, began to help themselves. The pilfering went on for hours. The lights went too.

The drivers were adamant. They would not proceed to Shkoder unless they were given an armed escort. Berisha was contacted and promised to help, but the Democrats' Communist partners in the uneasy coalition Government would lend no support. For three days the lorries remained in the compound, their drivers refusing to move.

Berisha was called one last time. 'Unless you have twelve policemen here by morning, the lorries will smash their way out of these gates and take everything to Romania.' At dawn the policemen arrived. Armed guards in every cab and an escort front and rear. The police gave a clear instruction — stay tightly packed and do not let anyone break in between you. The convoy left at breakneck speed. Horns blaring, traffic lights were crossed at red.

Out into the country, van Weenen noticed a car coming

up from behind, its lights flashing. Three times it tried to squeeze its way into the convoy, three times it failed. The drivers had outmanoeuvred the bandits. Half a mile up the road another gang was lying in wait ready to take the spoils should the team have been forced to stop.

In Shkoder the lorries were taken straight to the military compound. It was an explosive situation with the soldiers firing their automatic weapons in the air to create confusion. Discipline had broken down. The soldiers and police were helping themselves. People were arriving from every direction all intent on taking everything on which they could lay their hands. Boxes were disappearing over walls, under fences, through open doors. The desperation of ordinary people flocking to the gates was all too apparent. Old women, their hands pushed through every hole in the barbed wire perimeter, were begging and pleading for every parcel in sight. Unmercifully, the police smashed their hands with truncheons and the butts of their rifles.

In the chaos the equivalent of one lorryload was lost, but 90 per cent was successfully locked in the warehouse and later delivered to thousands on the edge of starvation.

Twenty trucks had begun the journey and twenty returned. Fifty men went in, fifty came out. No one was hurt. Under the conditions, it was a remarkable achievement.

Within months van Weenen would be back in Albania on a new and even more moving mercy mission. This time his sensitivity and persistence were to lead to blind Albanian orphans — for years neglected by the State and left in misery and degradation — receiving the gift of sight. How it was achieved is the subject of the next chapter in this continuing story of a remarkable human response to those so long deprived of hope, dignity and even the most basic of human rights.

Van Weenen is not in doubt that God's guiding hand played a significant part in his mission. Life in Christ can be powerful, positive and productive.

## ONCE I WAS BLIND . . . NOW I SEE

In a country where tens of thousands of people are engaged in a daily battle for survival, news of the presence of a Good Samaritan travels like wildfire. As the clamour for aid grows louder by the day, so too does the intolerable pressure on those whose mission is to provide whatever relief they can. So when John van Weenen returned to Shkoder to satisfy himself that his Task Force deliveries had reached their intended targets, he found himself confronted time and again with further pleas for help.

There had been evidence of theft in some institutions, a distinctly noticeable improvement in others, with clear signs that the children were not only delighted with the clothes that had reached them but, more importantly, had gained a degree of self confidence that had been so visibly lacking on earlier visits. Nowhere was this more evident than inside the city's largest orphanage where the new owners of Dennis the Menace and Desperate Dan T-shirts were behaving in a manner not dissimilar to the antics of the cartoon characters emblazoned across their chests. These are the sights and the moments that make all the sacrifices so worthwhile.

As for the Lincolnshire man who dispatched fifty litre tins of paint . . . if only he could have seen the relish of the caretaker as he mounted a makeshift ladder to give the place its first internal decoration in more than twenty years!

Alas, not all were joining in the fun. In the dormitory next door nurses were worried about the condition of other

recent arrivals. The Matron, unable to hold back the tears a minute longer, rushed into the room clutching four of the youngest children. 'You've got to do something for these poor creatures. . . The doctor says they'll all be blind within weeks, and there's nothing he can recommend and nowhere he can take them. I beg you . . . take them back to London . . . if they have nothing else, they're surely entitled to their sight.'

Van Weenen felt a shiver pass down his spine. He looked at the children by now in obvious distress. One little lad, Claudian, just 5 years old, was already blind in one eye. A scribbled note in his file indicated he had just 30 per cent vision in the other. Two of the other cases were similarly distressing.

By now Matron Mirjam Nooja was inconsolable. What had started barely an hour before as a happy reunion was degenerating into an uncomfortable and painful experience. As Van Weenen made for the front door, promising to make whatever sensible enquiries he could, the matron chased after him, the children still in tow. 'Take them now,' she pleaded again. 'You've got doctors over there who can do the job . . . please, please. . . .'

Van Weenen did what he could to calm the situation. 'Even if it was possible to get tickets and visas for these children to come to Britain,' he insisted, 'then the trauma of leaving the only place they have ever known, never mind having to sit in a car and an aircraft would be just overwhelming. I'll go back and see what can be done, but this time I'm afraid I cannot hold out any promises.'

With that he bade farewell and left, barely able to summon up enough courage to turn his head to offer a parting wave from the end of the dusty, pot-holed drive along which few ever bothered to venture.

Arriving home in Bedfordshire van Weenen slept uneasily for nights. He simply had to find a solution to the problem. After all that had been achieved he could not bear the thought of those children — so young and so desperately unfortunate — losing their sight. He told his wife: 'If I have to walk the length and breadth of Harley Street for a whole

week, I'll find the right people. The orphans cannot come here, so we'll have to persuade surgeons to go there. There's no other answer.'

Easier said than done. Where was van Weenen going to find an ophthalmic surgical team willing to extricate themselves even for a few days from their burdensome diary of clinics and surgery at a time when waiting lists were stretching for many months ahead?

As he wrestled with the problem, a thought suddenly crossed his mind. He hurried upstairs to his office and excitedly began to finger his way through the index file listing the names of all those who had contributed goods to his Task Force convoy.

The search went on for hours. Then, at last, a stroke of luck. Under the letter M appeared the name of Dr. John Maynard. Van Weenen had a vivid recollection of the day Maynard had driven to Bedford from his London home with sacks of clothes collected by his family and a box of assorted medical equipment he had obtained from a number of hospitals where he worked as an anaesthetist. He had even left his telephone number.

The call was immediate. Would Maynard be interested in making a mercy dash to Albania? And, more importantly, did he know of any eye surgeons who would be willing to accompany him? Not surprisingly, Maynard wanted more precise information. What would be required? What equipment did the Albanians have? Did anyone keep proper medical records of the orphans' condition? How long was it anticipated that the mission would last? The questions were endless, and there were few answers. Van Weenen had neither the knowledge nor the medical expertise to put Maynard properly in the picture.

'What I do know, Dr. Maynard, is that some of these children are losing their sight and there is neither the will nor know-how in Albania to prevent it happening. You are my only hope.'

As he put the phone down, Maynard felt that a heavy burden of responsibility had suddenly been thrust upon his shoulders. He looked across at his wife Gill and their four children, Jennie 17, Jo her 13-year-old sister, Tom 8, and the baby of the family, Lucy just 2. 'There they were . . . four lovely children — fit, healthy and intelligent. They had everything they wanted in life and more besides. Yet here was another dreadful picture. Orphans deprived even of a few hours in the fresh air, never mind all the things that children in England take for granted. And now they were going blind. If it would be difficult to say "Yes" then it would be much more difficult to say "No". Putting my hand in my pocket would have been relatively simple, but not the same as getting off my backside and doing something. I knew I had to go and I believed I knew the very man to join me.'

The man he had in mind was one of Britain's most eminent ophthalmic surgeons. Across Surrey and South London, Nick Jacobs is in great demand for his operating skills. National Health and private patients alike speak highly of his work. Here was a man who embodied all the positive traits of the English surgeon — great dignity, warmth and a powerful inner strength and integrity.

Jacobs too had a young family. The two arranged a meeting with van Weenen and the Chief Executive of the New Victoria Hospital at Kingston upon Thames, Charles Hutton. Though all remained apprehensive about what might be involved, it was decided — whatever the risks and uncertainty — that the team should leave at the earliest possible opportunity.

Van Weenen had done it again. He could hardly have handpicked a better team. The New Victoria is recognized as an intimate, independent hospital whose friendly, caring atmosphere and high level of medical skills have earned it a fine reputation well beyond the bounds of Kingston.

There was an additional bonus. The hospital has retained its charitable status and any surplus made from treating private patients is either re-invested or donated in charity in the form of free medical treatment. It was decided on this occasion that such charity should be extended to the Albanian children and that the hospital would pay the entire

cost of the mission, though the team would give their services voluntarily.

Within days Jacobs, Maynard and operating assistant John Gurrin were airborne, flying, they said, into the unknown and carrying everything they could think of. Despite numerous attempts to get detailed information about the state of the operating theatre at Tirana's No. 1 Hospital, they had very little to go on. As they settled into their Swissair seats for a breathtaking view of the rugged Alpine summits glistening in the glorious summer sunshine, there were unspoken fears that the whole venture might prove an unmitigated disaster.

The Albanian Government extended its usual courtesy at the airport. Dr. Tritan Shehu, the tall, handsome and engaging Minister of Health, was waiting at the foot of the aircraft steps after it had taxied to a standstill. He had even laid on official transport to take the surgical team straight to their hotel.

A few hours later the doctors found themselves ushered into Shehu's office situated on the top floor of the Health Ministry building just a few hundred yards from Tirana's main boulevard, Shetitorja 'Dëshmorët e Kombit' (Avenue of the Martyrs of the Nation).

The Minister's large, simply furnished room was in a chaotic state. At least three meetings were proceeding at the same time. Shehu was scrambling from one group to the other, trying to keep abreast of what was happening in order to bring some sensible conclusion to each discussion. In another corner of the room anxious Parliamentary deputies were pressing for his attention, while a Ministry official was trying to explain the workings of a portable telephone, something of an innovation in this part of the Balkans.

By this time I had managed to squeeze my way through the door too, hoping to secure an interview the Minister had promised the BBC. In a scene more reminiscent of a Saturday street market, something or someone, had to give.

The civil servants hurriedly concluded their business, rose from their seats, offered a polite nod and left in silence, demonstrating an intuitive understanding of a guest's needs.

Somehow, I could not imagine such happenings in the corridors of Whitehall!

Shehu offered his apologies for keeping us waiting. I was soon to discover why foreigners were given pride of place. The Minister was in a dreadful state; papers piled high on his desk, lists of important contacts with whom he must get in touch, a Fax machine which had broken down yet again. The sweat was pouring from his brow.

'Shall we do the interview now?' he asked hesitantly. I suggested he wiped his forehead and put on a tie. 'It will look more authoritative that way.'

Of course, he was pleased to see the ophthalmic team from London. 'You have no idea just how much this means to us . . . how much encouragement it gives. You won't believe it, Bill, when I tell you this country's health budget for the coming year. It's zero . . . I have not been given a penny to spend. That's the legacy of forty-five years of Communist rule. We need everything . . . medicines, syringes, blood bags. We are so dependent on Western aid and we have a massive reorganization of the health service to put in hand. Anything you can do will be appreciated.'

Listening just a few feet away, Maynard and Jacobs winced. What on earth could they expect to find in the operating theatre? If conditions were really as bad as this, would they be in a position to carry out the sight-saving surgery?

Dr. Maynard asked to be taken to the hospital at once. Van Weenen, cameraman Bhas Solanki and myself were left to make arrangements to ensure the Shkoder orphans would be collected by minibus the following morning for the two-and-a-half-hour journey to Tirana. It was vital everything should go according to plan so as to minimize any anxiety or stress on the part of the children, few of whom had ever left the orphanage grounds before.

We left for Shkoder at dawn, reducing the risk of running into an ambush. The road to the north is a favourite hunting ground for the brigands eager to profit in a country threatened by an unacceptable level of lawlessness. The police can do little, in part because they lack crime-fighting tools such as fast cars and computers. In addition, many

of them are despised as being too closely identified with the repressive regime of the past. Fearing reprisals from organized criminals, they rarely intervene to maintain order.

The crimes had been increasing in brazenness as well as number. Just a few days before, a group of Albanians had ambushed a foreigner whose car had crashed into a ditch. They stole everything they could carry, including technical equipment, food, tapes and clothing. They even dismantled and stole parts of the car itself. When the police eventually arrived, they appeared totally unable to control the mob and left without assisting the helpless driver.

Even the Minister of Justice was reported to have fallen victim to the crime wave, robbed by bandits at a road-block.

In the event, our journey passed without incident and arriving ahead of schedule, we decided to pay another visit to the Hospital for Mentally Handicapped Children. The matron, Lili Boshnjaku, was delighted to see us, but save for a remarkable improvement in the condition of little Albert, the scale of progress was still depressingly slow.

As our eyes scanned the familiar faces spread out across the dank, stone floor, in an instant we found ourselves unconsciously drawn towards a half-naked, pathetic figure slumped against the barred window overlooking the filthy, weed-ridden courtyard.

A more miserable existence it is difficult to imagine. Abandoned by her parents, Anila, who was 14, had lost her sight years ago while locked away in this miserable place. She had developed two cataracts — one in each eye — and had become totally blind. What's more it was thought that what few tranquillizers were ever on offer here might have been responsible for Anila's condition.

In that instant, we took a decision. Anila would return to Tirana with us. What Jacobs would say we could not be sure, but we believed he would want to do everything he could to try to restore Anila's sight. We told the matron to have Anila ready to move within the hour.

Half a mile away at the Tefik Jyliu Orphanage, Claudian and five other children with failing vision had been tidily

dressed and were eagerly awaiting the arrival of the minibus.

Hours went by, but still it did not come. Frantic attempts were made to reach Tirana by phone. It was impossible to get through.

As darkness approached we started south, promising the bus would arrive next morning come what may. There was simply no way in which we could have accommodated all the children in our already crammed vehicle and the orphanage insisted they must all travel as a group. The sense of disappointment was overwhelming. Six hours of surgery had already been lost and Jacobs and his team were only in Albania for four days.

Health ministry officials apologized profusely, explained that the minibus driver had refused to travel to Shkoder on the grounds that it was much too dangerous and promised faithfully that a replacement driver would leave at first light next day. Shehu was so angry and embarrassed over the incident that he ordered the driver to telephone him personally at the precise moment of departure.

He duly obliged. The only difficulty this time was getting the children to board the bus. Two were terrified, kicking and screaming, unable to be consoled. They had never ventured out of the front door of the orphanage in all of their six years.

By now Jacobs and Maynard had been able to examine the theatre in which they would have to carry out their operations. 'It was like something straight out of Charles Dickens; incredible squalor, a lack of any kind of organization and a dearth of equipment. We were shocked.'

There was, however, one completely unexpected asset. The ophthalmic microscope, once airlifted from Germany for the exclusive use of the country's former dictator, Enver Hoxha, had been seized from the family home. Now, for the first time, hundreds of ordinary Albanians could enjoy the benefits of micro-surgery.

Yet for years Hoxha had boasted of his achievements in building a health service that he insisted was the envy of most of the world. 'What we have done is evidence of the socialist humanism, which characterizes the people's power, of the reality of Albania where man is considered the most precious character.'

To be fair, Hoxha's regime could claim, with some justification, that it had done a good deal to improve health and social welfare. Expenditure, he once said, for the maintenance of all the health institutions at the time of King Zog was less than the entire pay roll of the King's courtiers. That problem was addressed by providing free medical treatment, and building more hospitals and clinics. Doctorpatient ratios were improved and the average life expectancy rose from 53 in 1950 to 68 in 1982. Yet compared with its Eastern European neighbours, the health service was riddled with shortcomings and inadequacies, not least the interminable waiting for sub-standard medical equipment arriving by ship from China.

Certainly Hoxha's repeated claims that only Marxist-Leninist ideals create the conditions needed to transform people's health was a blatant contradiction of almost everything Albanian doctors and nurses were having to face every day of the week. Though to have expressed such sentiments would have cost them not just their jobs but, very probably, a lengthy term in gaol.

Today it's a very different story. The medical staff are only too willing to let everyone know of their frustrations. Most operating theatres lack even the most elementary equipment such as surgical gloves, disinfectant, scalpels and catgut used as a thread to stitch the wounds.

Jacobs, Maynard and Gurrin had come prepared for the worst and by now were desperate to get on with their work. They decided first to perform a series of half-hour operations correcting many of the squints which, alas, are all too prevalent among so many of Albania's underprivileged children. All went well.

So tight was the schedule that for most of the time two operations were going on at the same time in the same theatre. Sulejman Zhugli, Albania's leading eye surgeon, was in charge of the second operating table. Jacobs was astounded by the quality of his work, given the primitive conditions in which he was forced to operate. Giving of his



Restoring sight . . . two operations taking place simultaneously with Nick Jacobs operating on one patient while supervising the other.

time here without any thought of remuneration seemed a very small sacrifice to Jacobs when he enquired what his Albanian colleague was earning. 'The equivalent of 25 US dollars a month,' came the reply, 'but at least I have the satisfaction of doing some good.'

Just how much good was soon evident. Hearing of the English team's visit, adults and children alike were surging down the hospital corridors, hammering on the doors of the operating theatre and clamouring to be seen. So disturbing was the noise and so great the fear of invasion, Jacobs had to give an assurance he would hold an emergency clinic between operations. The pressures were building on all sides.

In a tiny ante-room a nurse had emptied some coffee into a small cooking pot and was holding it in a near vertical position over the rusted elements of an electric fire. It would be quite some time before even a lukewarm drink would be available. Not that heat was any sort of a problem in this instance. Everyone who had the merest connection with Hospital No. 1, it seemed, was crowded into the theatre, marvelling at Jacobs's work and eager to learn and profit from the experience.

Now it was little Emiliano's turn. He had already lost all vision in one eye and glaucoma had reduced vision in the other to little over 4 per cent. Total blindness was only a matter of months away. Glaucoma, the surgeon explained, is a defect that takes place in front of the coloured iris. The eye fluid does not drain away quickly enough causing an increase in pressure, damaging the nerve and making the eye grow too large.

If the children were secretly nervous there were no outward signs as they sat holding hands with the orphanage staff and quietly waiting their turn. Toys had even been brought from Britain to help pass the time.

It was another piece of baggage, however, that was to be at the centre of a theatre crisis, and which would be paramount not just in saving sight but life itself. Maynard had been particularly worried about the anaesthetics available, so he brought his own, together with a saturation monitor, a lightweight piece of technology which gives a visual indication of the amount of oxygen in the blood stream. Lindita, attractive, intelligent and one of Albania's most highly respected anaesthetists, was surprised at such sophistication. A fluent English speaker, she was particularly keen to play an active role in Maynard's work. Indeed, she was first to spot something going horribly wrong.

Claudian was on the table. He had entered the theatre ever so calmly and within minutes a highly complicated operation was under way. Suddenly, the sound of an alarm could be heard and, as Lindita and Maynard glanced down at the monitor, they knew urgent and decisive action was required. The oxygen levels had dropped very suddenly and very rapidly.

Claudian's blood pressure was increased using a drug that stimulates the heart, ephedrine being injected intravenously. Without the little machine, Claudian might well have died in the operating theatre. 'We could have had a disaster on our hands,' Maynard told his Albanian colleague, 'so I am going to leave you this monitor. You don't know how many lives it may save.'

A few minutes' break was called for, but Jacobs was determined to honour all his pledges. The hospital director, overwhelmed by the numbers jostling on the stairs in their desperation to reach the English surgeon, set aside the biggest room in the building for an afternoon clinic.

For a time, pandemonium ensued. A policeman, presumably called to try to keep some semblance of order, seemed more interested in obtaining a premier position in the queue. It almost looked as if everyone in Tirana had some kind of eye problem. Even though most appreciated there was simply no way in which Jacobs could treat their ailment, just 'being seen' seemed to bring some sense of relief.

Back in the theatre, and preparations for the arrival of Anila. She had been brought from the Hospital for Mentally Handicapped Children in Shkoder still wearing her ill-fitting rags. No one had bothered to give her a shower, not even a cursory wash. This was symbolic of the way the country had regarded such children over so many years. Here, at last, one of them was about to get some special attention, first in the list of someone's priorities.

Anila was to provide the hardest test of the surgeon's skills. Jacobs had examined her thoroughly. Though her deteriorating cataract condition had now left her totally blind, there was an outside chance of restoring some degree of vision to one of her eyes.

Within the hour, the news came that everyone wanted to hear. Anila might just be able to see again. Jacobs, encouraged that the damage behind one of the pupils could be partially repaired, delicately set to work again, Hoxha's microscope proving a more than satisfactory aid to the painstakingly detailed work.

After two hours of intricate surgery the operation was over and Anila was wheeled back to the ward. It would not be long before the surgical team would discover if their endeavours would bring the result for which everyone had been earnestly hoping and praying.

Next day the bandages came off. From all directions

children, doctors, nurses and cleaners hustled for a place by the bedside. The suspense, for all, quite unbearable.

Anila sat up quietly and pursed her lips to a tight wistful smile. She pulled a banana from the hand of a highly emotional Lili Boshnjaku, moved it close to her chin and began to split open the skin.

'Unë shoh!' she whispered, 'I can see.'

Anila sees again and enjoys the fruit of the surgeon's generosity.



At that, loud cheers rang out across the ward. It was hard to ascertain who was more excited. Jacobs emptied half a dozen Smarties into Anila's left hand. She bent forwards for a few moments, clearly trying to focus on the luminous multi-coloured chocolate beans.

'Go on, then, count them!' Jacobs urged.

'Një, dy, tre, katër, pesë . . . ' Anila counted, pointing to each sweet in turn.

It was the outcome no one — least of all Jacobs and Maynard — had dared to predict. It also convinced them that whatever the difficulties, they must return. They did. Within weeks.

Meanwhile, the Albanian eye surgeon, Sulejman Zhugli and the anaesthetist Lindita have been undergoing training at Kingston's New Victoria Hospital, with Charles Hutton, the hospital's Chief Executive making frequent trips to Tirana to advise on the reconstruction of the health service there.

Others too, are willingly giving of their time, their money and their expertise. In the autumn of 1991, the people of Eastwood, a southern suburb of Glasgow, raised over £90,000 to send food, clothing and medical aid to the country. Now they've set up a Glasgow-Tirana Radiology Project. Ultra-sound diagnostic units for antenatal and general screening are being supplied and, with the prospect of further funding from the United Kingdom's Overseas Development Administration, up to thirty medical staff will be involved in exchange visits. Those Albanians training in Glasgow hospitals will live with families in Eastwood, thus becoming part of the community there.

The medical exchange programme is being passionately supported by Glasgow's Lord Provost Robert Innes. 'Our teaching hospitals are second to none. And this programme is an efficient and exciting means of helping the Albanian Health Service upgrade its equipment, procedures and knowledge so lives can be saved. I can think of no cause more worth while as we in Scotland play our full part in the development of a new and more peaceful Europe.'

Just as Anila has regained her sight, so the people of

Britain are slowly beginning to open their eyes to the appalling health problems of a country whose torment knows no bounds.

# SEEDS OF HOPE

Clouded and uncertain, Albania's future as a nation is now as seriously endangered as at any time in its troubled 3,000-year history. In the short-term only a guaranteed food lifeline from Italy and the European Community is preventing mass starvation. Even then, there may not be enough to prevent civil unrest on a scale greater than that witnessed in the early months of 1992 when warehouses and food stores were looted and set on fire, crowds rioted and dozens of people were killed and seriously injured. Political instability, economic desperation, a chronic shortage of raw materials and a lack of foreign investment — not to mention the perennial problem of Kosovo Province — have produced an explosive cocktail that has brought Albania to the brink.

To write off the country as a hopeless case, however, would be to ignore the resilience of its people whose ability to survive the most trying circumstances has been a constant feature of their history.

There are many encouraging signs. The destructive impulse for revenge which has had deep roots in Albanian culture has not, as yet, materialized to any significant degree.

The reason may well be found in the shared guilt over its Communist past which is now confronting the nation. Everyone was tainted to some extent by a compliance to the Hoxha ideology.

If humanitarian aid is still the greatest single need, in the longer term, moral and spiritual cleansing will surely be seen as of equal importance. For without healing, Albania's ability to solve its own problems will be greatly undermined.

There is also a desperate need to get people back to work. The problem is that most factories have run out of spare parts. Much of the machinery came from China and has long since been outdated. In Tirana's main bread factory the conveyors that feed the ovens were manufactured in Hungary in the early fifties. Their inventor, now an old man, made a special trip to Albania recently and stood in disbelief to see his device still in daily operation, despite the fact that every few minutes workers were scurrying about the place with an assortment of screwdrivers in a frantic effort to keep the production line moving in the face of constant breakdowns.

Massive foreign investment is required to lift Albania out of its economic crisis. By late 1992 the International Monetary Fund was expressing support for President Berisha's programme of radical economic reform. They pledged further aid for the country after hearing that inflation had been reduced from 300 to 200 per cent within months, prices liberalized, and that the Government had withdrawn subsidies to loss-making companies. Almost



Lifeline . . . aid arrives from the European Community.

90 per cent of the land had been privatised but farmers lacked fertilizers, seeds and farm machinery.

The European Community's assistance to Albania has provided about a hundred million pounds worth of aid in an early effort to address the problems arising from a paralysed economy. Funded projects include overseeing the restructuring of viable exporting companies in the hope of encouraging the flow of foreign currency into Albania. Most of the EC's money, however, has been spent on humanitarian aid. The British Government's share by the end of October 1992 had amounted to £12.5 million.

The return of religious freedom is one of the greatest seeds of hope for the future. Across the country, mosques and churches are being reopened, refurbished and restored at the believers' own expense. Crosses are reappearing on gravestones and mosque tapestries are being recovered from deep garden pits where they had been hidden 15 feet underground through the years of persecution. Even in villages where churches were completely destroyed, Mass is said in the only consecrated place, the cemetery. Yet the villagers are turning up in their hundreds.

On the second floor of a Tirana apartment block, I was introduced to a remarkable old lady of 87 who epitomized the spirit of those believers who refused to allow the worst excesses of the Hoxha years to extinguish the Christian flame which burned brightly within them. Meropi Gjika saw every act of suppression as irrelevant to what God would eventually achieve.

She had become one of a tiny band of Albanian Adventists in the 1930s who had been converted to Christianity by Daniel Lewis, a missionary who had settled in the town of Korca. In 1951, along with his Italian-born wife, Flora, he was arrested by the Sigurimi and imprisoned for his missionary zeal. He later died under torture after refusing to work on the Sabbath. At great personal risk and under the most severe psychological pressure, Meropi had visited Lewis regularly in prison, bringing him food and washing his clothes. More importantly, she vowed to carry on his work in secret.



Meropi Gjika translating the Bible.

As little groups of believers arrived at her house for worship and prayer, she would search for hidden microphones and blacken the rooms to foil the efforts of the secret police to photograph proceedings from windows on the opposite side of the road.

Just three years short of her ninetieth birthday, Meropi Gjika was finally baptized right under the dome of the museum which had been erected to immortalize the man who had counted the banishment of religion from his country as among his finest achievements.

Emerging from the baptismal pool in a frenzy of excitement, she sang loud praises to God for a day she had felt would never come. Since then she has seen many members of the Communist old guard and the secret police too, asking to become part of the Christian community. 'People can change. We do not intend to judge them but welcome them into our fellowship. God will be their judge.'

It was only at the time of her baptism that a visiting Adventist evangelist discovered the full extent of Meropi's courage and commitment over Albania's long years of spiritual darkness. From under her bed she pulled out a wooden box. Inside were her tithes, faithfully given and secretly stored every week for twenty-five years. She had also translated the entire New Testament of her Greek Bible into the Albanian language. It is now a treasured personal possession and a glowing testimony to one who steadfastly refused to recant her faith.

An Episcopalian priest from Glasgow, who has been at the forefront of the aid effort to Albania, has witnessed first hand many examples of faith in action. On a recent visit to the country, Revd Bryan Owen was taken with his friends on their Sunday off for a day by the beach. 'Our hosts took us en route to the second-century amphitheatre under which there is a ruined Byzantine chapel. Two elderly ladies were there — Ana and Gjinovefa. They had lit candles on the tiny altar, they had brought some painted hard-boiled eggs (the Orthodox symbol of the Resurrection) and they were saying their prayers. There is no priest in Durres.

'I was introduced to them as a priest in spite of being in shorts and a summer shirt and the way their faces lit up was so deeply moving. Ana and Gjinovefa had kept their Christian faith through the twenty-two years of enforced atheism and had survived. And here they were in a ruined chapel under a ruined amphitheatre keeping the flickering candle of faith alight. They were holding on to hope and they each gave me one of their painted eggs. I prayed with them and gave them a blessing (The peace of God which passes all understanding . . .) which was duly translated line by line by my Muslim guide! I gave them my card and assured them of my own prayers.

'There is an interesting parallel between the ruined amphitheatre and Albania today — ruin, within which there are signs of hope. The light of faith has not been put out.'

One of the biggest steps the country has taken along the road to its spiritual healing has been to grant its most famous daughter, Mother Teresa of Calcutta, Albanian



Mother Teresa of Calcutta receives her Albanian citizenship from President Berisha, 1992.

citizenship. She, above all, has identified with the needs of her country — the hunger, the poverty and the homelessness. Yet just as important has been her understanding of poverty as a spiritual need and her work for peace and reconciliation. She recently opened a Sisters of Charity Mission in her homeland and the Sisters run two orphanages and a kindergarten.

The East European Partnership, an initiative set up by Voluntary Service Overseas, opened Britain's first long-term development assistance programme in the autumn of 1992. Nurses, social workers, tutors and trainers are providing long-term community care for people with a range of learning disabilities. Albania has a high incidence of Downs Syndrome and many children are in hospitals for the mentally handicapped simply because they were developing slowly. Sixteen senior Albanian health service officials have undergone intensive training at MENCAP's College of Further Education at Pengwern in North Wales in an effort to establish a training network which aims to reach every person working with the mentally handicapped across Albania.

In the children's hospitals the incubators and ventilators sent from Britain are now saving many lives. A doctor at Tirana Maternity Hospital showed me a list of the number of babies who had survived as a direct consequence of being attached to the machines purchased with the money donated by British schoolchildren. In a three-month period the names totalled nearly a hundred.

The BBC film reports from Albania were transmitted around the world, resulting in substantial sums of money being sent from as far flung places as Fiji, Malaysia and the United States. Charone Smith, a paediatric nurse from Utah, was so upset by the scenes of suffering that she decided to leave for Albania at once. She has based herself in the largest hospital for malnourished children where weak and emaciated infants are now getting their muscles moving again. It's all part of her three-month programme of physical and emotional stimulation. These are, of course, only tiny ripples in an ocean of misery.

The winter of 1992 will be a major test for the patience of the Albanian people and the wisdom of the new political parties. If Communism in this part of the Balkans failed the test of history, democracy could hardly have had an unsteadier start . . . mass hunger within its own borders and the frightening possibility of a war with Serbia should the Kosovo problem explode into violence. With an army ill-equipped and unprepared for modern warfare, the consequences for Albania could be catastrophic.

By October 1992 half a million ethnic Albanians had already fled Kosovo. 1.5 million remained (as against only 200,000 Serbs). The Serbian leader, Slobodan Milosevic, appears, nevertheless, to be determined to break all resistance to his policies. The Serbs see Kosovo as 'the cradle of their centuries-old culture and religion'. The Albanian Kosovars, who had set up their own 'Government' and declared the province a republic under 'President' Ibrahim Rugova, were running a parallel society. With most Albanian students locked out or segregated in State schools and Albanian doctors and medical staff removed from hospitals, the Kosovars had opened alternative schools in private homes

and were treating their sick in a network of private clinics. Many Albanian workers had lost their jobs and been replaced by Serbians or Montenegrins, who had also taken over their homes. Those who had tried to resist were subjected to violence and beatings at the hands of the Serbian police.

There were fears that the Serbians were attempting to provoke an insurrection. In such circumstances, with few arms to defend themselves, the Kosovars would face bloodshed perhaps on a scale surpassing the horrors of the war in Bosnia.

In a specially-commissioned study for the Institute for European Defence and Strategic Studies, Marko Milivojevic, a Balkan affairs analyst, concludes that 'beyond Albania and Serbia, such a war would have major regional security implications for Greece, Italy, Turkey and Bulgaria. For that reason it could not be treated with the same relative indifference accorded by the West to the outbreak of the Yugoslav civil war in 1991.'

Despite such fears there are grounds for optimism about Albania's future. In a country where young people make up more than half the population, there is a genuine thirst for learning, with English having replaced Russian as the first foreign language in all secondary schools. It's not uncommon to find pupils as young as 14 reciting whole scenes from a Shakespeare play in perfect English without as much as a fleeting glance at the one textbook that is shared by up to forty pupils. One English teacher, Zana Harxhi, says, 'My pupils have an insatiable appetite for all things British. Burns, Dickens, Shakespeare and Byron. Not to mention the Beatles and the Rolling Stones! They talk about them endlessly. Everyone wants to visit Britain to see the place for themselves.'

What makes such enthusiasm all the more remarkable is the fact that lessons are being held in classrooms with no heating and often without a pane of glass in the windows. Two thousand British schools are now participating in the Education Aid project launched by the Government. Textbooks, pencils, notebooks and desks; all have been

arriving in regular consignments, and the British Council has opened a library and English Language Study Centre at Tirana University.

Efforts are also being made to improve the country's infrastructure, which is seen as vital in attracting investment from abroad.

At the end of the Second World War Albania was the only sizeable country in Europe without a national railway system. Enver Hoxha put that right by enlisting young 'volunteers' for railway construction using little more than their bare hands and a few basic tools. Because of the mountainous nature of the country most lines were built along the coastal plain, radiating from the chief port of Durres.

Hoxha's xenophobia and bad relationships with his neighbours meant little priority was given to linking the Albanian system with either Yugoslavia or Greece. A connection with Titograd in Montenegro was finally established in the mid-eighties but, even then, a maximum of two freight trains a day crossed the border, and further developments have been hindered by deteriorating relations with Belgrade.

Albania is now looking south-eastwards for links with the European railway network and has an ambitious and costly plan to built a route from the present terminus at Pogradec on the shore of Lake Ohrid to Florina in northern Greece.

A BBC colleague, Geoff Sarbutt, who has studied the railway system at first hand, found it to be in a deplorable state, with most locomotives and carriages vandalized. In discussions with Albanian Railways, Sarbutt was asked to make all possible efforts to find technical assistance to help keep the system running.

The roads are crumbling under the pressure of an everincreasing number of second-hand cars obtained from Italy and Switzerland. Road accidents, virtually unknown in Albania prior to 1991, caused by inexperienced drivers and badly maintained vehicles, are now a source of increasing worry. Most buses too, are also in a dreadful condition and vastly overcrowded. In country districts private concernsoften the owners of just a single vehicle — operate without timetables or designated bus stops, and collect whatever fare they think their impoverished passengers can afford.

The telephone system is being upgraded at last. Outside the main cities it is hard to find anyone with a phone. Getting a call through via the manual exchange can take hours.

Former Foreign Minister, Muhamet Kapllani, who occupies the English Chair at Tirana University, is cautiously optimistic about Albania's future. 'If in a year's time things are a little better and the crisis of confidence begins to decline, I would consider it a great achievement. People will realize that we cannot go on as we have been doing, sitting idly by and waiting for humanitarian aid. With sound treatment in the intensive care ward a man's life can be saved in a few days and then he has to walk on his own. But if he cannot get through those first two or three critical days he will surely die. That's true of Albania today. She is on the edge of a precipice. I hope no one will push her into the abyss. History has taught Albanians the art of survival and history is a good teacher for every nation.'

Given meaningful political and economic stabilization and a feeling of general security, Albania may yet attract foreign investment on a substantial scale. There are considerable reserves of offshore oil and gas, as well as chromium ore. In 1979 Albania was the world's third largest exporter of chrome. In recent years the country also exported hydroelectric power to Yugoslavia from the power station on the River Drin. Great potential exists for tourism with unspoilt beaches along the Adriatic and a beautiful, indented coastline southwards from the port of Vlora to Saranda, washed by the Ionian Sea. Albania is also rich in castles, museums and archaeological sites.

It is a country where ordinary people — once terrified at the consequences of talking to a foreigner — now find engaging in English conversation one of the most precious pleasures in life.

Diplomatic relations with the United Kingdom have only recently been restored. They had been severed as far back

as 1946 after a notorious incident in the Corfu Channel, a narrow stretch of water between the Greek island and Albania.

Two British warships were fired upon by Albanian coastal batteries. It brought an immediate protest from Britain. Albania apologized, claiming the incident had been due to an unfortunate error. Later, however, two naval destroyers, sailing southwards through the same channel, struck mines. One of the ships was wrecked and the second severely damaged with forty-four British sailors losing their lives.

This time Albania denied responsibility. The case was referred to the International Court of Justice in The Hague. Albania was found guilty and ordered to pay Britain over £800,000 in compensation. When the Albanian Government refused to pay up, the United Kingdom in turn refused to release £10 million-worth of Albanian gold which had been looted by the Nazis during the Second World War and afterwards placed in the custody of Britain and the United States.

Finally, in May 1992, the dispute which had dragged on for nearly half a century was settled at a meeting between the British and Albanian delegations in Rome. Britain agreed to return the gold from the vaults of the Bank of England, with Albania pledging to pay the United Kingdom £1.1 million in damages over the Corfu Channel incident.

Both countries have been dilatory in exchanging Ambassadors or setting up proper diplomatic missions in Tirana and London. By late 1992 Britain had decided to send a chargé d'affaires only for the six months of their presidency of the European Community. British interests are the responsibility of the British Ambassador in Rome, hardly a satisfactory arrangement.

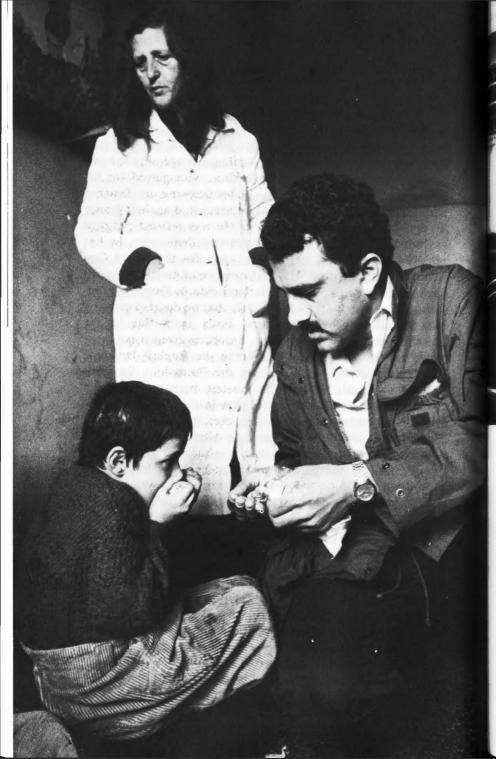
As a direct result of the present tension in the Balkans, the BBC World Service has decided to restart programmes in Albanian as soon as trained staff become available. The plan is to produce sixty minutes of programmes each day, divided between breakfast time and evening transmissions. There had been vehement protests about the service being withdrawn in 1967. Indeed, many had risked imprisonment

by listening to the BBC secretly during the years of repression. Now that the last redoubt of unabashed Stalinism has gone and their isolation is finally at an end, Albanians are continually looking for reassurance that the outside world cares about their future.

At Parkhead, home of Celtic Football Club, the fans have been providing plenty of vocal encouragement for one young man from Shkoder. Rudi Vata, who played for his home town club of Vllaznia before moving to Dinamo Tirana, defected after Albania's international against France at the Parc des Princes in Paris. He was refused political asylum but, since his country embraced democracy, he has regained his place in the national team for the World Cup qualifying competition. His performance in midfield against Jack Charlton's Republic of Ireland side in Dublin so impressed Celtic manager Liam Brady that he decided to bring him to Glasgow. Vata is now living in a flat in the Lanarkshire town of Hamilton, has been given a two-year work permit, and is busily learning the English language (Glaswegian style!) while helping the flourishing Scottish-Albanian appeal. One of its greatest benefactors, Brian Donkin, owns a chain of oyster bars in Edinburgh and has found his customers enthusing over his latest import, Skanderbeg Cabernet Sauvignon, an Albanian red wine with a distinctive taste. Annette Beuth, who runs the Scottish appeal, finds it the perfect arrangement. 'The lorries take our Albanian aid on the outward journey and return laden with crates of the wine. It's a great favourite here.'

For Albanians, though, a glass of wine remains a luxury few can afford. In city and countryside their paltry wages and inexhaustible energies are spent in the unseemly scramble for bread, in the long queues for paraffin and cooking oil, and in obtaining a few drops of fuel for their cigarette lighters — a flicker to illuminate the darkened communal staircases as they negotiate the broken concrete slabs leading in a dismal upwards spiral to the barely-furnished rooms of a high-rise home.

On the historical margins of Europe, Albanians have been the forgotten people, the invisible race. Now, as the





Left: Tasting a sweet for the first time . . . cameraman Bhas Solanki introduces a new experience at The Hospital for Mentally Handicapped Children in Shkoder. Above: Sharing a child's world through the bars of his hospital 'prison'.

Photos. Karen Davies

country slowly emerges from its self-imposed isolation and freedom of speech returns, the Albanian voice surely deserves to be heard. The ghost of Enver Hoxha has finally been laid to rest, his preserved body removed from the guarded marble tomb beneath the statue of Mother Albania — whose figure dominates the Tirana skyline — and placed instead in a common grave with a headstone bearing no more than his name. As one observer noted: 'It is quietly terrifying to consider that the neurosis which kept three million people locked up was inside the head of one man.' Hoxha's wife, Nexhmije, accused of corruption, is in

Tirana Gaol awaiting trial. His successor, Ramiz Alia, is under house arrest and facing similar charges.

In a nation with no democratic tradition Albania faces the most uncertain future of all the States of Eastern Europe. President Berisha insists that, when it comes to aid, his country should be seen as a special case, because it had to endure Communism under the harshest and most brutal conditions of all.

Those who experienced its worst moments and whose accounts have appeared within these pages, are of one voice in calling for stability and reconciliation. Stoking up old hatreds, they say, will only serve to blight the lives of another generation. Their hope is that the world has learnt a lesson from Albania's tragedy. For by its silence it showed a shameful indifference that may have served to extend the agony.

For some the physical and mental damage that wrecked their lives can never be repaired, yet the knowledge that at last they can freely talk of their experiences is, in itself, an almighty release. That so many on the outside are now moved to respond gives Albanians hope and courage in their renewed and ever more desperate fight for national survival.

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## CHARITIES HELPING ALBANIA

A substantial number of charities and organizations are now involved in providing humanitarian relief and longer term assistance for the people of Albania. This list indicates just how widely that support is spread across Britain. It is, of course, not a complete listing, and the author would like to convey his thanks to groups and individuals working for the Albanian cause whose activities have not, as yet, been drawn to his attention.

#### ORGANIZATIONS AND THEIR CO-ORDINATORS

FEED THE CHILDREN, (incorporating Education Aid) David Grubb, Jeff Alderson, Peter Annereau, 1 Priory Avenue, Caversham, Reading, Berkshire, RG4 7SE. (0734) 464444.

#### ADRA Trans-Europe

John Arthur, 119 St. Peter's Street, St. Albans, Herts., AL1 3EY. (0727) 860331.

#### ADRA Humberside

Melvyn Ellis, 23-25 Worship Street, Hull, Humberside, HU2 8BG. (0482) 589523 or (0904) 651868.

#### ADRA Scotland

Ruth Farrer, Gwydyr Road, Crieff, Perthshire, PW7 4AN (0764) 2611/2589.

#### TASK FORCE ALBANIA

John van Weenen, Fineshade Abbey, Fineshade, Northants, NN17 3BB. (0780) 83284.

#### BRITISH RED CROSS

Chris Holdsworth, 9 Grosvenor Crescent, London, SW1X 7EJ. (071) 235 5454.

#### SAVE THE CHILDREN

Matthew Bullard, 17 Grove Lane, London, SE5 8RD. (071) 703 5400.

#### **OXFAM**

Douglas Saltmarshe, 274 Banbury Road, Oxford, OX2 7DZ. (0865) 312297.

#### EAST EUROPEAN PARTNERSHIP

Tanya Barron, 15 Princeton Court, 53-55 Filsham Road, London, SW15 1AZ. (081) 780 2841.

#### **VOLUNTARY SERVICES OVERSEAS**

David Green, 317 Putney Bridge Road, London, SW15 2PN. (081) 780 2266.

#### **MENCAP**

John Payne, 123 Golden Lane, London, EC17 0RT. (071) 454 0454.

#### OCKENDEN VENTURE

Ailsa Moore, Guildford Road, Woking, Surrey, GU22 7UU. (0483) 772012.

#### GLOBAL CARE

Peter Burnett, PO Box 61, Coventry, CV5 6AX. (0203) 602203.

#### PHYSIO AID

Kit Evered, 17 Cumberland Road, Kew, Richmond, Surrey, TW9 3HJ. (081) 940 1579.

#### THE TRAINING TRUST

Pauline McCabe, 145 Great Charles Street, Birmingham, B3 3JR. (021) 200 1140.

#### SCOTTISH ALBANIAN APPEAL

Annette Beuth, 23a Dalmeny Street, Leith, Edinburgh, EH6 8PQ. (031) 555 6411.

#### SCOTTISH ALBANIAN MEDICAID

Revd Bryan Owen, St. Aidan's Rectory, 8 Golf Road, Clarkston, Glasgow, G76 7LZ. (041) 638 2860.

#### SHETLAND AID TO ALBANIA

Joanne Adamson, Virdaklee, Cunningsburgh, Shetland, ZE2 9HG. (0950) 3334.

#### SKYE AID TO ALBANIA

Dr. Alan Humphrey, Corriegorm, Broadford, Isle of Skye, IV49 4AB. (0471) 822515.

#### SUSSEX AID FOR ALBANIA

Roy and Hilary Loosley, Blackboys Nursery, Blackboys, Nr. Uckfield, East Sussex, TN22 5JX. (0825) 890858.

#### WOOTTON BASSETT ALBANIA APPEAL

Martyn Giles, The Woodshaw Inn, Woodshaw, Wootton Bassett, Swindon, SN4 8RB. (0793) 854617.

#### CHALLENGE ALBANIA

Sarah Ashman, New Barn Farm, Bucklebury, Reading, Berks., RG7 6EF. (0734) 712579.

#### ALBANIA AID APPEAL

Chris Blake, 200 Marlow Bottom, Marlow, Bucks., SL7 3PR. (0628) 472220.

#### LAUNCESTON AID FOR ALBANIA

Irena Cheater, Treetops, 2 Park View, Launceston, Cornwall, PL15 9AJ. (0566) 773307.

#### NORTH-WEST ALBANIAN APPEAL

Tom Brennan, 2 The Strand, Ashton-in-Makerfield, Gt. Manchester, WN4 8LD. (0942) 720648.

#### MULTI-INTERNATIONAL AID

Margery Pryce-Jones, Unit 14, Queensway Meadows Industrial Estate, Newport, Gwent, NP9 0SQ. (0633) 275125.

#### ANGLO-ALBANIAN ASSOCIATION

An association to foster friendships between the peoples of Britain and Albania.

Hon. Secretary and Treasurer: Denys Salt, Flat 6, 38 Holland Park, London, W11 3RP. (071) 727 0287.

# ALBANIA WHO CARES?

From the end of World War II the people of Albania lived in enforced isolation, subjected to the cruelties of the most severe totalitarian regime in Europe Until his death in 1985, the country's Stalinist dictator, Enver Hoxha, ruled through terror and the politics of permanent purge. Thousands of enemies, real and imaginary, were eliminated, all forms of religion outlawed, links with Yugoslavia, the Soviet Union and China were severed and nearly a million military pillboxes built to protect his tiny state from invasion.

The truth is that the world was totally indifferent to Hoxha's Albania. Now the doors have finally opened, the scale of the repression is all too evident. Tens of thousands are on the edge of starvation. Hospitals are deprived even of aspirin. Families are emerging homeless and penniless from prison and labour camps.

Albania, Who Cares? is the story of their faith and courage in the face of relentless persecution and torture. It tells, too, of the sacrifice of the people of Britain who have responded with five million pounds worth of aid and professional help aimed at easing the pain in Europe's poorest country.



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